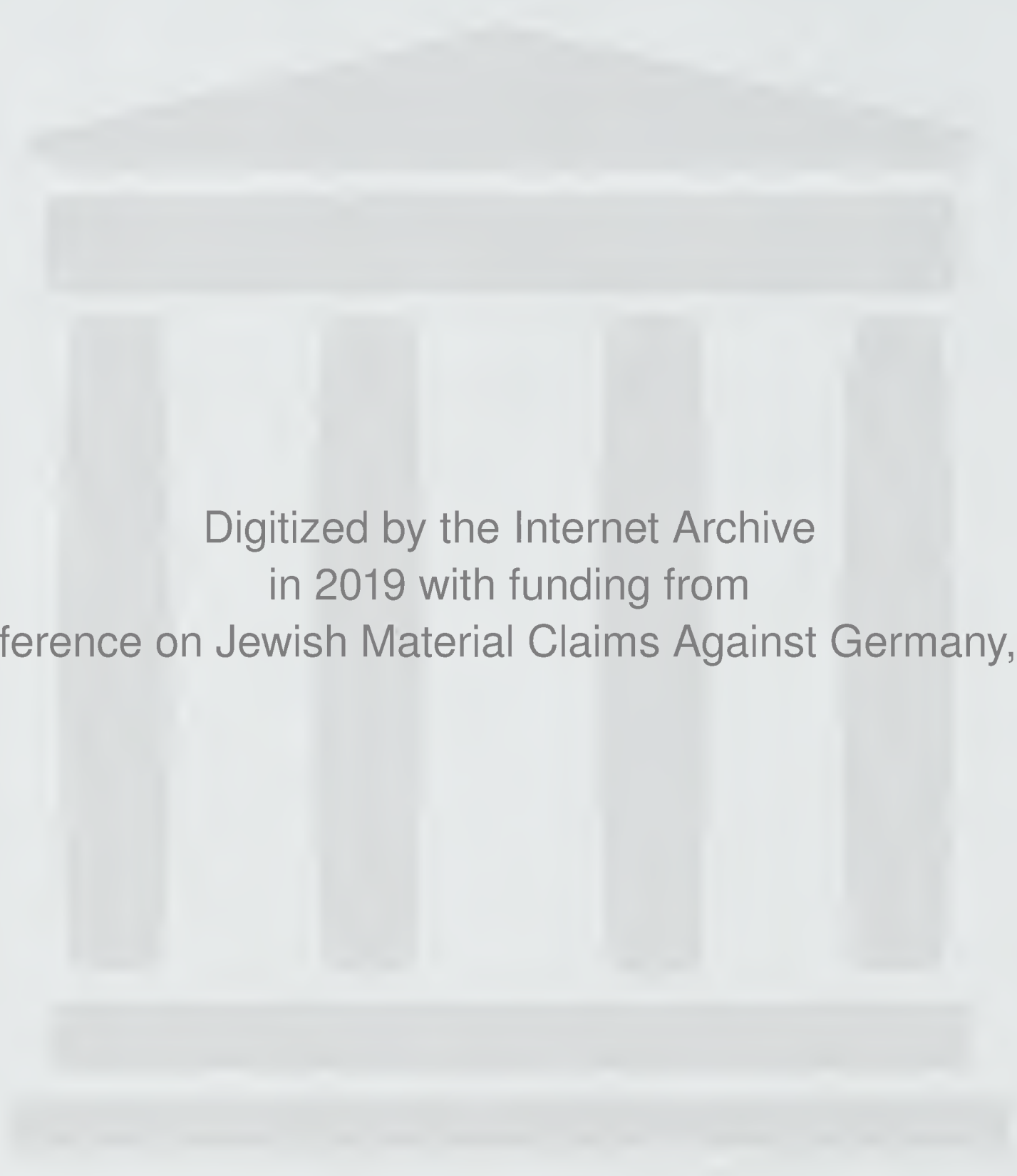


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Memories of a Generation

By Michael Goldberg

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Introduction

Several years ago, my father, Michael Goldberg, began to tell me stories from his past. They were many and different, all fascinating. As time went by, we both felt it would be a tragic waste to let all these memories disappear.

The result became a loving collaboration, Memories of a Generation. It is something we are glad to have made for ourselves and for others.

Perhaps this will inspire an ongoing tradition, tales to be told by a member of each succeeding generation.

Irene Stundel



Part I



WHEN I DECIDED to put on paper my best years, I did this for two reasons. The first reason was to leave a legacy to the coming generations, that they should know the ways that we went through. The second reason was that the place where I was born and raised was situated at the crossroads between West and East and many of the historical occurrences in an era of great changes in the world came through the streets in which I grew up.

I will try to start from my earliest childhood. My parents, Yakov Goldberg and Fayge Levinsky, got married at the beginning of World War I, in 1915. At this time, our town Pinsk, suddenly became the frontline between the advancing German army and the Russian army. The town was bombarded daily by Russian artillery which was based on the other side of the river Pina. My parents were forced to evacuate to the west, about 40 kilometers, to the village of Okhovo. I, Moishe (Misha) Goldberg, was born there on September 29, 1916 and the irony of this situation was that I was delivered by German military doctors as this area was occupied by the German army. This group of Germans treated the Jewish population of the town in a very humane manner as in the early part of this century there was a different German government policy from the one that came later.

My first childhood memories start when we returned to Pinsk after the end of the war, when I was about three and a half years old. I remember returning with a whole procession of horses and buggies containing all our belongings. We were helped to move by the farmers of Okhovo. I was attended by a Christian woman named Kristen who took care of me and who remained in our home, almost like a member of our family.

My later recollections of that period were connected mostly with fear and terrible happenings, which is not a way for a child to grow up. This was a time when children begin to understand things which they could not have understood under normal conditions. This was not a normal time. In my mind were imprinted scenes that I witnessed, which my parents later discussed with me and explained the meaning of. The first terrible thing happened when I was four years old. I remember when soldiers with guns burst into our house, looking for my father and another man who were hiding in the cellar of our house. My mother and I were standing at the entrance of the cellar, which was covered with a rug. Forever I will remember my mother's admonitions to stay silent. I was told that if the men were discovered they would be killed. The soldiers were patrols from the Bolshevik army which at the time occupied our town and were looking for men to draft into the army.

Our house was divided into two parts. The front was inhabited by my mother's uncle's family, the Epsteins. The other half of the house was occupied by my family. I remember that during these stormy years, every few weeks the town was overtaken by different factions. The Epstein father and four sons were carpenters who built

customized furniture in their home workshop. They made a special hidden door under a bed which led from their apartment to ours. In times of searches, the two families used to run from one apartment to the other. I remember that the windows were always covered. We lived as if in a cave. Those were the terrible 1920–21 years, when each day could bring death to someone.

Then came another terrible day, still impressed upon my memory, when during an entire night we heard shots outside and cries for help. The next day we found out that a new gang (Balakhovtsy) whose purpose was to find Bolsheviks, had gone on to find and kill some of the Jewish people of our town. We found that our nearest neighbor, my closest friend's father, Tukiel, had been murdered. This was a devastating blow to my child's security, because I had seen my own father as a stalwart rock, always there to protect me. If this could happen to my friend Velvel's father, then it could some day happen to my father. Thus began the nightmares that were to haunt me for a long time. This was only the beginning of a chain of events in the terrible times during which I grew up.

To relate the next event, I have to explain how I came to be a witness to it. Our house had an attic from which I had a view of the several directions leading from our home. I made this my observation spot to watch over the happenings outside as we were banned from leaving our house for periods of time due to dangerous situations. This ban was a result of the changing military and political situation. Across from our house was an old cemetery which had already been unused for many years. From my observation point in the attic I could see

the entire cemetery. I am telling this to explain how I witnessed the terrible things that happened. For a few days, the town was in fear because of the entrance of the Polish army which was chasing the Bolsheviks. The populace was anxious about what the new rule would mean for them. On the particular morning I wish to describe we heard shots coming from the street. As usual, I was already at my observation post in the attic to report to my family as to what transpired outside. Suddenly I saw wagons led by horses, surrounded by Polish soldiers with guns. The wagons were loaded with corpses. One of the bodies fell off the wagon and it turned out the man was just wounded, and still alive. He started to crawl towards the gate of my home, but was caught by the soldiers and thrown back onto the wagon. I witnessed the entrance of the wagons into the cemetery and I saw all the bodies buried together in one grave, the dead and the alive. Later on I found out that the thirty six men who were murdered were the cream of the Jewish population. The only crime these men had committed was to gather together for a meeting to solicit funds to buy matzos for Passover as there was a shortage of goods in the town. This abhorrent event occurred just before Passover. They had been denounced by provocateurs who were trying to ingratiate themselves with the new regime. The collaborators denounced the Jewish group as being Bolshevik agents. In later years, the Jewish population of Pinsk built a monument at the burial site with the names of the 36 martyrs. These were the earliest life experiences I had, which to this day, remain indelibly imbedded in my mind. They revealed early to me mankind's worst aspect.



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WITH TIME, THE situation under the new Polish rule stabilized and life became more normal. In our family we already had a new addition, my sister Yetta, born in 1920. Since I can remember, our family was always cramped in our living quarters. Besides the four of us, there was my maternal grandmother, Raizel, my mother's sister, Esther, and her son, Osher, whose father was living in America. In addition, we also had our housekeeper, Kristen. I do not know how we managed in three rooms, but we did. We were a happy family.

Soon, big changes came in our lives. My grandmother, my aunt, and my cousin all went to America. The Epsteins in the next door apartment emigrated to Palestine. We moved to the larger apartment which they had vacated. Our former apartment was then occupied by the family Solodovnik, whose children became close friends of mine. (One of them is now a rabbi in Brooklyn.)

I soon began to attend school. The schools at that time were styled in the form of a cheder, (a Hebrew school), but with a more modern system which taught the Polish language and mathematics. However, the main emphasis of our education was based on Jewish religious and nationalistic ideals which planted in our

young minds the roots of Jewish heritage. I thus completed five years of private school studies. As a result of the influence of my religious school teachers, I became very religious during that span of time. I remember that I used to go to pray three times a day in the neighborhood shul. I was influenced by my neighbor, Moishe Solodovnik, who was a few years older than I and who had already attended a yeshiva with the goal of becoming a rabbi. He later accomplished this goal by graduating from the highest rabbinical academy in Poland. (He was, in fact, the neighbor who is now the Brooklyn rabbi.) My ambition at that time was to follow in his footsteps. These goals were greatly supported by my mother, who was quite religious. My father, on the other hand, was far from the religious persuasion. He was, from his earliest years, very active in the Marxist-Zionist party. I was witness to the conflicts between two extreme personalities. I could never figure out what brought together my parents. I remember every Saturday, when I was already about ten years old, my father used to take me to his party meetings. I was the only child there, and I sat and listened to my father lecturing. He was the leader of that group. I was very proud of my father. However, this used to bring out the conflicts between my parents, because my mother was against my father "poisoning my mind with politics", which were against her beliefs.

The party to which my father belonged owned a large library and my father brought me there at a very early age. He explained to me that this was "the university in which you can get your education. Here you will find answers to questions which many people are unable to explain to you." Thus was developed early the hunger

for knowledge and the love for reading which have remained with me to this day.

After the departure of my mother's family to America, we enjoyed our expanded living space. Suddenly, again it began to get crowded, because within the next few years our family increased to four children. Rivkah was born in 1922 and Golda in 1924. My father established a tailor shop in our house and became so successful that he was employing five extra workers. I cannot imagine now where we all found space in that small house. I recall that our housekeeper, Kristen, was sleeping on top of the enormous flat-topped oven. Some of the children used to join her there.

A tragic incident occurred in 1925 in our family. One day, as I returned from school, I found police in our house. It seemed that we had a robbery in which we lost expensive items such as jewelry and money. The police took away our Kristen who was suspected of being an accomplice by helping a man from her home village to commit the robbery. To me, this was a great disappointment in human nature again. Kristen had been like a second mother to me. This was the end of Kristen in our family. The police never found out the truth of this matter, but Kristen never returned to us again. Her place was taken by a young Polish girl named Frania who was with us for many years.

When I was twelve, I completed my Jewish school education and began attending the Polish public school. The majority of the students in that school were Polish and one had to attend a Polish school in that particular era to "appreciate" what it meant to be a minority. It was a terrible shock to me to find myself the object of animal

like hatred after years of growing up in an environment of friends and gentle teachers. This was the beginning of the 1930s during which Poland was swept by a wave of anti-Semitic economic and political persecution. In some areas of Poland, pogroms exploded against Jewish neighbors. This placed me in a difficult position and interfered with my education, to say the least. I began to get involved in fights with the Polish students. It appeared that I was born with weak tolerance for injustice, and the only way I could deal with it at that time was to fight back. This brought me much trouble in school with the authorities, and my father was often called to the school about my infractions. I started to fall behind in my studies as a result of the psychological problems I was having in school.

During the coming years, our family again grew. In 1926 my brother Yehiel was born and in 1930 was born the last of the children, my brother Shlomo. We were thus a family of six children. We received a large sum of money from America which was left to my mother following the death of her mother. My father used the money to expand his business and to establish a shop outside the home. We also built an addition to our house by adding another room and a kitchen. Suddenly, we were living in better quarters. My father's business was doing very well at that time and it looked as if we were on our way to a better life.

But our good times were not to last long. At the beginning of the 1930s my mother became ill and this, at that time and place, was catastrophic. There was no medical insurance, and all expenses had to be paid out of pocket. Costs were terribly high. For example, a visit

to a doctor was equal to two or three days pay. We spent large amounts of money for my mother's care and finally we had to place my mother in an expensive hospital in Warsaw for several months. This took all our savings and it took my father away from business for longer and longer periods of time. Our situation started to go from bad to worse. I knew my parents had high ambitions for me in life, and were ready to help me obtain a good education, but I realized then that I could not accept their help and sacrifices. By the age of 16, I had to start to help them in their endeavors. I told my parents that I did not want to continue my education, because as the oldest in the family it was my responsibility to help them. We were brought up with feelings of caring for each other and helping each other out. I decided to start working in my father's business and thus save the cost of hiring an outside worker. I expressed this decision to my parents by telling them that I had lost interest in education, because I did not want to hurt their feelings. I started to learn my father's trade and to help my father support our family. However, our family's economic problems worsened because we had to spend much money to send my mother to sanatoriums for treatment in an attempt to save her. Here began a very bad time in my life. I had to grow up in a hurry with worries for my brothers and sisters, but this was the spirit of the family in which I was raised.



AS OUR ECONOMIC situation worsened, I began to realize that this was the situation of the majority of the Jewish people in Poland who were concentrated in ghettos and had to depend on each other for a living. In 1935, Pilsudski, the ruler of Poland, died. He had been sympathetic to the problems of the Jews, as he realized the important role that 3 million Jews played in Poland. Following his death, the situation for the Jews of Poland became worse with each day. There were economic and political boycotts against Jews. This was the beginning of a movement for the extermination of Polish Jewry. I started to analyze the future of our people and to look for ways out of an awful situation.

At the age of 17, I met a girl my age. Her name was Hannah Plotnitska. She was an exceptional person, both in her intelligence and in her appearance. She became a great influence on my thinking and she brought me into the Halutz Youth organization. This was a Zionist organization which believed in the creation of a Jewish homeland. I became active in this organization whose ideals I saw as the only solution to the problems of my people. The essence of this organization was to prepare the youth, through hard physical work in Polish centers called kibbutzes, for emigration to Palestine and by hard

work there, to establish a homeland based on our historical past. Soon, Hannah went to breathe life into her ideals by joining the largest agrarian kibbutz in Grokhov, a suburb of Warsaw, in order to acquire experience for emigrating to Palestine. Unfortunately, she could not realize her dream, because she was caught in the occupied Warsaw Ghetto, where she, together with her sister Frumah, were killed in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

I could not follow the same route, because I was tied down with my responsibilities at home and because of the troubles with my mother's health. My father's health began to worsen due to pressures at work and home. I was involved in a situation without a solution. During that time, I started to realize that a dream of a Jewish homeland was going to get me nowhere. I had to make peace with the situation at home.

During this time, I met a new friend, Rosenberg, who was to play a large role in my future. He was one of the leaders of the illegal Marxist youth organization in Poland. He brought me into the dream of a society which would solve all the international economic and social problems. I was carried away with this dream — that only a socialist revolution would solve the Jewish problem as it would solve all the other societal problems. I felt I had to join a movement which could improve our life in all aspects. I gave up the dream of leaving Poland as an impossible dream. While the Polish government was trying to chase us out of Poland, there was no place to go. The British government which had control over Palestine, closed all entrances for the Jewish people to that country. I felt that the only way for us was to join a fight to improve our lives where we lived. These ideas

brought me to join the movement, which my friend had painted for me in such beautiful colors. Here started for me a very dangerous time, because during that period in Poland was established a fascist dictatorship which used drastic methods to destroy our movement. I was again in a great turmoil because I knew that if I got arrested it would be a bitter pill for my parents to swallow. But despite all my fears, I became very active in this movement.

In March 1937 I had a bitter experience in my life, the death of my mother, who was only 42 years old. This beheld me even more responsible to my family. My father, who was not in the best of health before, started falling apart after my mother's death. This was the year I was to be called to serve in the Polish army, a situation which created problems for my father. First of all, he had become dependent upon me, and second of all, being a smart man, my father predicted the oncoming war. He decided to do everything in his power to see that I avoid serving time in the army. He went to a special complex to lose weight and arrived at the stage in which he was unable to do any physical work. Then he went for a government medical examination which decided that he could not support his children. I thus became the only provider for our family. I realized later what a personal sacrifice my father had to make to accomplish the task of keeping me out of the army. Until we received the provider permit, I was obligated to join the Polish army, and I was sent to a military unit in the city of Brest. I remained there for two months until my father received the papers to free me from the army. This was one of the miracles that was to occur in my life, because the

following year, the German army attacked Poland and all of the friends who had joined the army with me perished in the first action of the war. It appeared that my father's sacrifice saved my life.



IN SEPTEMBER 1939 Germany attacked Poland. This meant the end of Polish rule for our town. From the very first day of the war, the normal life of our town collapsed. Immediately, we had a shortage of all goods. The Germans started to bomb Pinsk. I remember digging a shelter in the backyard of our house, a place to hide the family during the bombing raids. A special episode I can never forget occurred during a raid. My youngest brother, nine-year old Shlomo, ran away to the neighboring cemetery to hide under the trees. I had to run to find him and bring him to the shelter. I was so angry that I spanked him for disobeying and afterwards suffered heartache for hitting him. I did not realize he did this out of fear. I was outraged because at that spot in the cemetery our neighbor and her ten year old daughter had been killed during the German bombing raids.

Then began for us days of hunger because it was very difficult to obtain provisions. Nobody wanted to take Polish money because of the uncertainty of who was going to rule the next day. In the first week of the war, the Polish police disappeared. There were no authorities. The town was organized into citizen patrols. After a week, rumors came that the German army was coming

closer to Pinsk. As a result of the Hitler–Stalin Pact, Poland was divided between Germany and Russia. We were not sure who would be ruling Pinsk. With the fear of possible German occupation, people began to run towards the Russian border, especially people like me who had been involved in anti-fascist activities. At that time we believed, with all our hearts, that only to the East was the real paradise. It is funny that while living so close to the Russian border we still did not know about what was really going on there.

Finally, on the seventeenth day following the German invasion, we found out that the Red Army was approaching Pinsk. Again, history repeated itself as when 19 years earlier the Bolsheviks had come to Pinsk. On the morning of September 17th, I saw the remaining Polish soldiers crossing the bridge over the river, leaving Pinsk on their way south, hoping to escape the Red Army. We witnessed the destruction of the bridge by the retreating Polish army. That was the end of the Polish rule of Pinsk. A few hours later, we saw the oncoming Russian troops. I remember a moment when my sister Yetta and I started to kiss each other from excitement when we saw the “liberators”. And again my intelligent father passed a remark. “Don’t celebrate, give the new rule a chance to see how it is in life.” For me, personally, this looked like the final judgment, the beginning of an era of justice for all. Just like that, in one night, we were transformed from a capitalist system to a communist system, and history was again made in our streets.

The only thing was that difficult times were starting again, because the established economy was destroyed and a new system was very slow in the making. From the

first day of the new rule, as usual, products necessary for survival disappeared. The new system brought us meetings in the main square of the town where the army commissar used to give inspiring speeches about the good things yet to come. This was a very difficult time, especially for our family with so many mouths to feed and food harder to get. Then I got help from a new source. After the departure of my friend Hannah, I got involved with my sister Yetta's school friend, Raizel. Raizel's family lived about 7 kilometers from Pinsk, on a farm which was one of the few Jewish farms around there. The family had owned the farm for many generations and made a living from it. I started to spend time with Raizel. In the summer, I used to go to the farm, which was located near a forest and a river, and I became very close with Raizel's family. In our difficult times, I used to visit them and exchange goods for produce from the farm. In this way, Raizel's family was a big help to our family.

The new government immediately liquidated all private enterprise, even the smallest. My father, as a tailor, had to surrender his tools and machines. Thus began the organizational phase of cooperatives in different branches of the economy. This was supposed to make everyone an equal partner in the government sponsored business.

Before the war, when I was active in the illegal Marxist movement, we had organized a group which was trying to educate itself and to prepare for a time when we had to really participate in leadership in a new society. Our teachers were students from Vilna University and leaders in the illegal movement. They taught us economic and

political science from a socialist perspective, and also the Russian language. I don't understand even now where we found time for all these activities. To establish the new rule, the Soviets needed to organize local political cadres, and people like me found themselves in demand as leaders. Under the new regime, the Communist Party was the boss in virtually all aspects of life. In any enterprise, the party members were in control of all phases of production, and everything was based on propaganda and party control.

With the establishment of the new rule, my friend, Isaac Rosenberg, who brought me into the Marxist movement, had become one of the top leaders in the regime and also sponsored my activities. When the tailor cooperative was organized, I became the manager of the cooperative. Suddenly, I found myself in the role of boss over my father and others like him. At that time I was a believer in that new society, which I thought would bring a better life for all working people. I began to work very hard because we were faced with great problems as in a very short period of time we had to create what was given the Russians themselves at least twenty years to do.

Despite the political turmoil and economic hardships of the time, our family's life began to improve. I was paid a large salary and I found a job for my sister Yetta as the supply manager in the same organization. My sister Golda got a job in the cooperative's cafeteria. My father thus became the lowest paid member of the workers in our family. I advanced higher in my political career and when the central bureau of city cooperatives was created, I became the chief of propaganda. At the same time I became active in the city party committee. My days and

nights were busy taking care of my new responsibilities.

Towards the end of December 1939 I was sent to a party conference in Minsk, the capital of Byelorussia. There I had my first glimpse of the real conditions of life in the Soviet Union. When I arrived in Minsk, I was placed in the best hotel in the city, in a suite which I shared with a party secretary from Bialystok. After the hardships of life in Pinsk, I saw the luxurious conditions which the party elite took advantage of. We were served three meals a day, an unheard of luxury in those times. I had a chance to visit the factories and saw the cafeterias in which the workers ate. I saw the meager meals they were served, and in my conversations with them I started to find out about the real sad conditions of their lives. This caused me to have second thoughts about my beliefs and I discussed these doubts with my hotel roommate. He warned me that if I continued to express my misgivings, I would not have a long future. Fortunately, he was a very open minded and honest man. He explained to me that the bad economic conditions in which the Russians were living were a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Stalin believed that he could buy peace by exporting many of the goods needed by Germany. This caused shortages of the goods in Russia. I could see the sadness in my roommate, because as a Jew, he was outraged with the policy of appeasing the anti-Semitic and fascist regime of Nazi Germany.

When I returned from the conference, I encountered great difficulties in continuing my activities in the movement, as each day brought new problems in the production of the cooperatives which were comprised of small factories scattered all over the city. These factories

belonged to private owners before the nationalization and continued mainly to be run by these former owners who had become foremen and production specialists. We had great difficulties in obtaining supplies because the entire economy was in shambles. I was the main political controller of this production and responsible for fulfilling quotas. I had to push the workers to produce, knowing meanwhile what meager pay they received for their work. At the same time, I had to advocate the political party line, which in the winter of 1940, became difficult for my conscience due to the Soviet invasion of Finland and the resulting heroic resistance of the small Finnish nation which was fighting for its independence. This period brought a crisis in my thinking. I saw things I could not explain to myself, not just to the workers. At the same time, when the Soviets felt established in the new territories, they began to conduct a reign of terror against the local populace. First, during the night, portions of the Polish population of Pinsk started to disappear and were deported to Siberia. After that, came the deportations of Jewish people who were suspected of being members of socialist and Zionist organizations under the Polish rule.

In the summer of 1940, I was sent out to the villages surrounding Pinsk to help conduct the collectivization of farmers. We were faced with terrible resistance from the farmers. In one of these villages, while staying the night after a meeting, I was almost killed when shots were fired through the window of my room. Escaping death here was another one of those miracles which happened to me during those difficult years.



DURING THIS SUMMER, I also moved out of my father's house. I felt it was time to be independent and I also wanted privacy. But the main reason for the move was because of the situation with my paternal uncle, Moishe Goldberg. My father's younger brother was a very rich man, one of the few Jews who was active in the former Polish ruling party. Suddenly, Soviet security police were looking for him. My father and his brother were very close. My father approached me to help hide my uncle, as he felt I had the power to do this.

At that time, I was seriously involved with Raizel, who was living at her uncle's home in Pinsk. She found an apartment in her uncle's neighborhood which was formerly inhabited by a deported Polish family. She encouraged me to take this apartment, which was free from the government. I think she was hoping to have me closer to her. When I moved to the apartment, my uncle came to live with me. Actually, he was hiding there and I provided all the necessities for him as he was afraid to leave the apartment. His family was meanwhile deported from Pinsk to some faraway village. This was part of the campaign to deport all of the (formerly) rich people from Pinsk. After hiding him for four months I helped my uncle to escape to the town of Vilna, which had just

become an independent Lithuanian republic. This independence did not last long, but in the meantime, many refugees from Pinsk escaped to Lithuania, from where they made their way to the West. I found out about this possibility from my neighbor, Moishe Solodovnik, who approached me to join him on this journey as we had the opportunity of getting to America via Lithuania. I refused his offer because I was still a partial believer in the new society and because I could not leave my family, for which I felt responsible. He went by himself and was fortunate enough to reach the United States. But my uncle was not so fortunate. He was later picked up by the Soviet police in Vilna and disappeared forever.

After my uncle left my apartment, my girlfriend Raizel moved in with me. Our parents, with their beliefs, started to pressure us to get married. In October 1940, Raizel's parents invited us and my father to the village of Goroditch, not far from their family farm, where they had relatives. This invitation was meant to celebrate my birthday. But when we arrived there, we had quite a surprise. At the home of Raizel's aunt was gathered the entire family, with a rabbi and a chupah. Thereafter a ritual Jewish wedding was performed.

When I look back at that period of time, I can see that my personal life had improved radically. I had a high position in the political administration which paid much better than the average worker. My wife obtained a government office position. We had a nice apartment. Raizel's father, who had a lot of money, bought us furniture. I was able to help my father and my siblings. But I was not satisfied with my life because I started to detect more injustice in the new regime than in the

previous ones. I felt I belonged to a small minority which had improved their lives at the expense of the majority of other people. Besides that, with my Jewish nationalistic outlook on life, I realized that this new regime would not bring salvation to the Jews. I found myself becoming assimilated into a society which had no place for Jewish culture. For someone who had been raised in a completely Jewish environment during the Polish rule, an environment filled with Jewish daily newspapers, magazines and other publications, and with theatrical productions which were renowned world wide, it seemed to me that there was now no future for Jewish society.

By the end of 1940, the local party administration came to the conclusion that it no longer needed the help of the local cadres. We could feel distrust towards those of us who had been born as Polish citizens. Administrators from the original Soviet territories started to replace the local leaders, among whom I was one. At the time I had become very friendly with a couple from Leningrad who were in the highest party positions in the city. They were Jewish, people with high cultural standards, former professors at Leningrad universities. I spent much time at their home discussing many current issues and was surprised to find mutual thinking in people raised in a Soviet society. The husband confided in me one day that he had been approached by Soviet security people who were quite interested in my background of Zionist activities under the Polish regime, and that I was in danger of being arrested. He advised me to resign from my position and to look for some less noticeable means of employment. He stressed that the higher I went, the harder I was bound to fall. This was a brave action on his

part, because by warning me, he had placed himself in danger.

Among the factories involved in the cooperative, was one particular chemical plant which consisted of a few small, formerly family owned, companies. The largest of them had previously belonged to the three Vladovsky brothers and produced a variety of household chemicals. The brothers, now foremen at the chemical combine, became my close friends during my supervisory tenure. When I explained my predicament to them, they advised me to resign from my post and become a worker at the plant as I had become familiar with the production process. They promised to teach me all the necessary knowledge to become a worker there and assured me that with their help I would make more money than I was already making at the time. They felt glad to be able to help me in light of the many favors I had done for them in the past. I had a difficult time getting permission from the party to resign my current position. I achieved my resignation by stating reasons of poor health which was partially true due to the constant traveling that eventually exhausted me. I started my new career in the chemical plant and soon, with the help of the Vladovsky brothers, who were very good to me, learned the tricks of the trade. This period of my life lingers in my memory as the best months I had during the Soviet rule.

In March 1941, with the heightening of international tensions, I was suddenly called up to join the armed forces. This was a partial mobilization. At this point, another miracle occurred. When I arrived at the mobilization station, there were 350 of us. We were assembling to march to the railroad station, when suddenly an

officer arrived. He called out three names, one of which was mine. He told us to take our belongings, go home, and await further instructions. The rest of the draftees were marched to the railroad station and were sent to the military base at Brest-Litovsk, bordering the German army. They all perished in the first day of the war, (June 22, 1941) when the Nazis overran their military base. I survived this particular holocaust because of the miracle that occurred on that March day in 1941. I never did find out why the three of us were selected to be sent home.

Like this then, we came to the summer of 1941, prior to which I had been enjoying myself as it appeared that things were getting back to normal. My family had a better life than before. Suddenly came that terrible morning of June 22nd when we were awakened by bombing raids on our town. We found out we were in a state of war because Hitler had attacked the Soviet Union. I remember running to my father's house, because a time like this was a time to be with one's family. On the radio we heard Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov's announcement that we were actually in a state of war with Germany. Like it just happened, I remembered my father's comment, "That will be the end of us."

Part II



FROM THAT MOMENT on there was complete chaos. The entire Communist system of administration broke down from the first day and all leadership disappeared from public life. The second day of the war I was called to one of the mobilization stations located in the public schools of the town. To better understand the situation of the population of Pinsk, one must know that the outskirts of our town were situated between the new border of Germany and the old border between Poland and the Soviet Union. The border was closed to the town population and we therefore could not escape to the original Soviet area. This explains why the majority of the population remained in town in the face of advancing German troops. We were trapped.

Before I reported to the mobilization station, I went to my father's house. I realized that this might be the last time I would see my father, brothers and sisters. It came to me that because I had been so absorbed with my own life and activities I had not paid much attention to my family. This was the time to take in what each one of them meant to me.

I started with my father, a man who projected a cold exterior, but who was in fact, a very warm human being. At the time, he was in his early 50's, a man of average

build, with light blue eyes and blond hair. My father was a self educated man of high intelligence. I thought how lucky I had been to be raised by such parents as mine, who contrasted against many of their contemporaries in gentleness and appearance. I am sure that if they had been born in a more opportune time and place, they both would have achieved much more of what they were really capable.

I then looked at my sister Yetta, who at the age of 16 had already been left with the burden of a house and children to take care of. She was not given a chance to develop her own personality. I then looked at my favorite sister Rivkah, with her dark, shy looks and tremendous intelligence in academic studies. Given time, she would have achieved greatness in some respect. In contrast, my youngest sister Golda, with her blond looks, did not care for studying but was more interested in having a good time. My brothers Yiehel and Shlomo did not have a chance to develop themselves. At age 14 and 10 respectively, they had not yet formed definite characters. Yiehel was blond like his father, whereas Shlomo looked like a miniature copy of me and had already developed a hunger for books. As I contemplated my family, I also noticed my wife, Raizel sitting there. I realized that in the short time we had been together, I could not find it in myself to reciprocate the love she had shown towards me. My marriage had turned out to be a spontaneous act, which at the time it occurred looked like a necessary way of getting out of my situation at home and gaining some freedom. I now realized that I had no common bonds to my wife besides the attractions of her beauty and kindness. She did not share in the cultural and

political world in which I lived. In reflecting upon them all, I was concerned with not ever seeing them again, but ironically not from any presentiment of their doom, but from a consideration of my own danger from anticipated combat in war.



2

THE NEXT MORNING I reported for the draft. We were stationed in a school to await further developments. At night we slept on the floor. Suddenly, we were awakened by an alarm. When we ran outside, we saw the western sky aflame, and heard explosions. In the panic that ensued there was a feeling that perhaps the Germans were advancing on the town. No one knew for sure what was going on. We received orders to march to the east in the direction of the town, Lunietz, and there to await further instructions. We walked the whole night and towards early morning suddenly found ourselves under fire from the direction towards which we were marching. Later we found out the shooters were German parachutists who took position to block our retreat. We were helpless because we had no guns. Fortunately, a column of sailors and trucks soon came from the direction of Pinsk. They had been stationed in port at Pinsk. They gave us guns, and together we destroyed the German force. The sailors took us along on their trucks, and we continued on. When we approached Lunietz, we faced the same chaos that was prevalent in Pinsk. The few remaining officers with us stupidly stationed us at the railroad station which was full of trains loaded with tanks, inviting targets for the German air force. By the end of

the day, we suffered our first attack from the German planes, with no place to hide. I witnessed a massacre. This was my first war experience.

The next morning, we received orders to move back to Pinsk. We were loaded on cattle trains for our journey back. When we arrived in Pinsk, we were told that our excursion had been a false alarm, as the explosion was in a military base behind the town, sustained as a result of a direct hit from German bombings. We were then stationed in a church in the center of town where we received military uniforms and became a part of the regular army. During the next few days, we still did not know what was going to happen to us. We had nothing to do and there was still no leadership or training.

The church was very close to my father's house, and I found time to visit the family. I found only my father there, who told me that the children had gone to my wife's family farm where it was thought they would be safer and at least have food available. My sister, Yetta, was not at the farm as she had gone to work on the day of the move and had not returned home. Only my brother, Yiehel, had remained at home, hoping that I would return. When he came into the house, he begged me to take him with me to my military station. I explained to him that there was no room for a fourteen year old in a military unit. I thought that very soon we would find ourselves engaged in combat.

The following morning at the military base, we discovered that our officers had run away. Because of my connections with the Communist administration, I decided to go to party headquarters to seek instructions for our next move. I found the first party secretary, Kovaliev.

After I explained our situation, I was told that my unit was on its own. Only the party leadership was left, and it planned to evacuate to a base in the forest, from which it would organize a partisan resistance movement. The German offensive was gradually encircling the town, and soon the entire area would be under German occupation. Kovaliev suggested that due to my former political experience I could choose to join the partisan movement or go back to my unit. When I returned to the base, I explained the situation to my unit and told them that there was only one retreat available, over the bridge to the south. I then told them to march to the nearest railroad station which had connections to Kiev. They were free to go home or to embark on that adventure. I also told them that the latest they could leave would be 12 midnight. After that time the bridge would be destroyed. Eventually, from 360 men only 80 were left, the majority of them Jewish soldiers. The rest decided to return to their homes.

This was still early in the morning, so I decided to try to walk to my wife's farm and to make a decision about the family. But when I tried to walk out of the town, I was stopped by military patrols and was told that no military person was allowed to leave in that direction. When I explained my purpose, they did not believe me and thought I was a deserter. They brought me back to the city military post which was the only authority left in town. The officer in charge said I was to be shot as a deserter. He did not believe in either my story or my identity as the town was already filled with German spies. I told him to get in touch with the party secretary, Kovaliev, to verify my identity. Fortunately, Kovaliev was

still at headquarters and was able to confirm my story. When I returned to my unit, it was already evening. I decided to go to my father's house. When he asked me why I had returned, I told him I was looking for civilian clothes for travelling to the farm. I could not leave before seeing my brothers, sisters and wife. When I told my father that the bridge was to be destroyed at midnight, he insisted upon my departure with the army, as he was sure that due to my political record I would be one of the first to be hanged by the German invaders. I was later shocked by the naive attitude of the townspeople who believed that although the political activists were in danger, the average citizen was not. Finally, persuaded by my father's arguments, I returned to my unit and to the shocking discovery that only 26 soldiers were left. Even the Jewish soldiers had left. Only the hard core Communists remained. At eleven o'clock we left Pinsk. We were met at the bridge by the demolition squad and helped it to place the explosives. About midnight, the explosives were detonated and thus was destroyed our last link with Pinsk. I looked back at my hometown, which was in darkness, and I had a premonition that I would never again return to my former life. In a period of 20 months I had witnessed two demolitions of this bridge, and was now a fugitive from my own home.



WE WALKED THE whole night, and by morning discovered that the road was filled with hundreds of civilian draftees who had left town before us from different mobilization points. It was the beginning of a terribly hot June day as we continued our march towards the town of Stolin. We walked, hungry and thirsty. In this area there were few villages, as the land was primarily marsh. Due to the scarcity of fresh water, we had to drink marsh water. As the day progressed, we saw German planes overhead. Since there was no resistance, the planes flew so low that the Germans were able to machine gun the people on the road. Many times we had to hide in the swamp bushes. During the march, people split up into small groups. By nightfall, our group of five people stopped in a farming village. We bought bread and milk, had our first meal in two days and settled to sleep on the floor of a farmer's home. Because my military boots caused blisters, I could hardly walk and was quite uncomfortable. After a short rest, I woke up and went out of the stuffy room. I then overheard a conversation among several farmers conspiring to later kill the Jewish Communists because they probably carried gold with them! This deed would also earn them commendation from the advancing Germans. I immediately awoke my friends

with this news and in the middle of the night we again continued our journey. This episode was another blow to my belief in humans; these farmers were the kind of people who had lived side by side with us for hundreds of years. This incident again reinforced my belief in Jewish independence and a life in which we should not have to fear our neighbors.

By the end of the next day we arrived in Stolin, a small Jewish town in the middle of nowhere, famous only because of the Stolin rabbi who had followers all over the world. We arrived on a Saturday. I was surprised to see the townspeople going to the shul as if nothing unusual was happening. We approached and asked them what they were going to do. They replied that they would do whatever the rabbi was going to do. This was the typical apathetic attitude of the Jewish populations of these areas who could find no friends to whom to run. When we came to the military gathering place in a school, I found a few surprises. I met my cousin, Bereleibe, there and the biggest surprise of all, my wife's younger sister, Lyuba. She had been working with her local village administration and when her superiors ran away, they took her with them. Suddenly, we had a girl among the soldiers. Looking at her I had second thoughts about my siblings, regrets that I had not taken them with me. It was, however, too late for regrets. When my sister-in-law saw my bleeding feet, she brought me medical supplies.

The next day we marched another five miles under the leadership of the one officer who still remained with us. He gathered all the hundreds of draftees together and brought us to a railroad station which was the only connection to the rest of the Soviet Union that was still

open. This became a gathering point for all the people from various directions retreating from the Germans. We were told we were to be transported to the military base in Smolensk where we would receive our military training. We were loaded on cattle car trains, 50–60 persons to a car and started on a long journey without any provisions or sanitary facilities. After a few days travel, our train changed directions because the Germans had cut off our original route. On July 2nd, we arrived at the major railroad station of Brest. Unbelievably, we were left stranded for three days at this station on the train, prey to German aerial attack. A few times a day, at regularly scheduled hours, the Germans would methodically bomb the station and hundreds of soldiers would be killed. Thus, many of the draftees never got a chance to participate in the war. For them it ended here at the railroad station. Nothing was done to change this situation. Finally, a few officers arrived and gathered the remains of the army. They put us on a train heading for the city of Oriol. When we arrived there, we were stationed again in a city school. For two weeks, we lived there in the stifling heat, slept on the floors, and twice a day marched 10 kilometers to a military mess hall for meals. Before every meal we had to stand outside in the hot sun for two hours to await our turn.

After the two weeks, we were finally taken to a military camp on the outskirts of Oriol. There were no facilities. Our only shelter were the trees in the forest. We were fed smoked herring and black bread, and spent the days in military training. At least we were stationed alongside a river, where after what had begun to seem an eternity, we were able to wash ourselves. We had arrived in the

same underwear we had on when leaving Pinsk. There were no supplies. Those of us who arrived in civilian dress still had no military clothing. Eventually, the German planes found us. I was wondering why they did not face any resistance. They used to come and massacre us and no one disturbed them. At the beginning of the war, there was no Soviet anti-aircraft defense. Everything had collapsed. Soon, the advancing German army came close to our position. We were told that we were going to be the line of resistance against the German offense.

Suddenly, one night, we were awakened by our officers. I noticed that only the contingent from the Pinsk train was awakened. We were ordered to follow the officers at a running pace. After a few hours of running, we arrived at a railroad station and were again loaded on our old friends, the cattle car trains, which were already filled with hundreds of other soldiers and civilians. We found out later these were all people born outside the Soviet Union. We had no idea as to our destination. One thing we saw was that we had no guards surrounding us. That meant we were still free people. Our trains started on a journey to northeastern Russia. We could not understand why, in a military situation, we, who were capable soldiers, were being sent in a direction opposite to the one we were needed in. In that train, I discovered people of different nationalities: Polish, Ukrainian, and Germans born in the Soviet Union, where their families had lived hundreds of years. We figured out that we were all people considered untrustworthy by the Soviet regime.



4

THUS BEGAN FOR US a long journey to the north of Russia. I discovered the poverty and the terrible conditions of the people in the areas we passed through. We travelled through republics of minorities in Russia such as the Chuvashis, the Monrdovs, the Bashkirs and the Udmoores. They looked like people living in times of centuries past, both in economic and cultural terms. I was shocked at the poverty that still existed so many years after the Revolution. We travelled for weeks, as our train would sometimes stop for days at a time. We were filthy and hungry, fed on rations insufficient for survival. The only additional goods we had was if someone had money and could buy from the local people at the stations we stopped in. Personally, I had a very rough time because at the beginning of the war I developed eczema on the leg below the knee. From lack of treatment, this condition spread to my entire leg. I was in terrible pain and could find no help for my condition.

Finally, at the beginning of September we arrived at our destination, the city of Izhevsk, the far northern part of Russia, famed as Gulag country. We were stationed in the forest in the outskirts of the city. Our homes consisted of tents. We were told that we were now a working colony, a part of the Red Army, soldiers in building the

war industry. Because of the advancement of the Germans, the Soviets had evacuated most industries from the West to the East, and we were to build the new facilities for the military factories. We worked from 5 A.M. until 6 P.M. We all became builders working under terrible conditions. We had difficult jobs which had to be done by hand since equipment was unavailable. At the same time we were also building homes for ourselves; small underground huts. Meanwhile, winter arrived, which here started about the end of September. Suddenly, we found our tents covered with snow and we slept on the frozen ground. We were fed three times a day, with the same amounts of soup consisting of frozen potatoes and cabbage, served in barracks without floors, where our feet stuck in mud. It was no wonder that soon we had on our hands so many sick from the cold, starvation and hard labor. I remember meeting my cousin, Bereleibe, and not recognizing him because his body was swollen three times its normal size. This was often the result of the lack of nourishment specifically needed in these northern climates. Thus began a new chapter of my life in Izhevsk, where I was to remain for three years.

The war battalion that was established at Izhevsk consisted mainly of draftees from Pinsk. We were subject to all the rules and regulations of the army. There were hundreds of us who had managed to escape from Pinsk and being placed together made us feel as if a small part of Pinsk was being recreated. I noticed that a good number of the cream of Pinsk youth had managed to gather in one place. We continued former friendships and established an organization of mutual help which served us in the years to come.

Among us was a group of men who had taken part in underground activities in Pinsk before the war. We decided to send a petition to the Central Party Committee in Moscow asking that we be used in actual combat against the Nazis and to be allowed to take part in partisan activities behind the lines, in territories known to us. This petition was signed by 26 of us in the early days of December 1941.

A short time after this I became ill as a result of the harsh conditions in which we worked and lived. I developed pleurisy of the right side and had to be sent to a city hospital. During my stay in the hospital, the headquarters of our battalion received orders to immediately send the signers of the petition to Moscow for disposition by the Central Party Committee. Because of my illness I was the only one of the signers to be left behind when the rest went to Moscow. I then started to really believe in the providence which seemed to keep me from actualizing potentially deadly enterprises. It was as if something was working to keep me alive against my own decisions. I found out that the entire petitioning group was trained in diversion and sabotage activities in a special school near Moscow and was then parachuted into the forests of White Russia (Byelorussia) to fight against the Nazis. Most of them did not return alive from this venture. I lost several of my closest friends in this group. Especially painful for me was the death of my dear friend, Shama Shuster, who had been a very promising young artist.

After I recovered from my sickness I returned to my battalion. The doctor prescribed easier work in my trade and I opened a tailoring establishment to serve the needs of the soldiers in the area. This occurred during the

worst of the winter, when the temperature dropped to 52°C below zero. My work made it possible for me to stay overnight in my tailor shop and to avoid the murderous conditions in which the rest of my friends lived. In this first winter of the war I lost many friends to the cold, the hunger and the terrible working conditions they suffered during the building, which did not cease for even one day. During my work in the tailor shop I became very close to another tailor from Pinsk, Sasha Klitenik, a closeness which resulted in a lifetime friendship.

In April 1942, after the building of the factories was completed, our battalion was disbanded. However, we did not acquire our freedom, because we were then placed to work in areas which were selected for us and which were connected with defense needs. Most of us found ourselves again working under brutal conditions. Some of the people who found work to their liking were immediately arrested and sentenced to harsh prison terms. A few of them died after a short time in the terrible gulags.

Again I was one of the lucky ones. I remained to work in my trade and this enabled me to have better lodgings and food. Because the authorities needed us for tailoring, we received special deferments from the military draft. In these favorable conditions I spent the next few years. The close relationships among the Pinsk contingent continued; as a result of these ties, many of us found ourselves better positions which enabled us to provide help for the less unfortunate among us. Thus hundreds were able to survive the dreadful circumstances. I remember many instances of friends returning from prisons in a state close to death. All our efforts to revive them

failed because their systems could no longer sustain nourishment. Witnessing their slow deaths was the reality of the Izhevsk years.



OUR COMBINATION TAILOR-SHOEMAKER shop expanded over time and we had about 35 workers. According to Soviet authorities, we were then eligible to be union members, a dummy Soviet organization without any rights or privileges for the workers. I was elected shop steward, a position with authority and respect among the workers. I am bringing out this point because of what followed.

At the beginning of 1944 the Russian army was preparing for larger offensives against the German army. The authorities called for a massive draft to refill the depleted army rolls. As the Soviets were coming closer to our former homes in Byelorussia, it was decided that now was the time to draft even former Polish citizens. Suddenly we received notice to report to the draft board. When we went to the labor department for discharges from our jobs, we were told that we did not have to report for the draft, as our deferment papers had been forwarded to the Defense Minister in Moscow for renewal. Since it would take several days to receive the renewals, we were advised meanwhile to move to Glazov, a city near Izhevsk, to work temporarily in the munition plant there until the permits were received. This move was engineered really to temporarily hide us from the draft because of the competition at the time between the military

and the civilian authorities for manpower. When we returned to our premises I called a meeting of the workers to decide whether we would go to Glazov. When my opinion as shop steward was asked, I said that I was ashamed to be hiding from actual combat and that I would not obey the suggestion to move. My conscience told me it was time for me to move on to real fighting, but the others were to do what their consciences told them. After the meeting, we decided to remain where we were and await whatever further developments destiny would bring us. I want to emphasize that by this time we had received much information about the holocaust the Nazis conducted against the Jewish people in our hometowns and we were full of desire for revenge.

We lived in the same premises where we worked and the following night we found ourselves suddenly surrounded by soldiers who had come to take us to the draft board because we had not reported there after the second summons. We were kept at the draft area for two days during which time were conducted talks between our civilian employers and the military administration. Our employers had meanwhile received our deferment renewals but the talks were to no avail as the military did not want to let us go and the latter prevailed.

After three years I said goodbye to Izhevsk. We were taken to a military training base in Siberia. As it was quite frosty there, and we had to stand, I exchanged my new boots and some money for valenkis (heavy felt-like boots) at the Sverdlovsk railroad station. The training base, Komishlov, an old military base consisting of old barracks in deep forests, was filled with thousands of soldiers. At the receiving depot, I was asked many questions, specifically

about my sport preferences. I replied that I played soccer and skied in the winter. This reply resulted in my placement in a skiing unit which was training for combat in the mountains. Little did I know that my innocent answer would bring me so much hardship. I had to travel tens of kilometers a day on skis, loaded with military equipment. We were fed three times a day, with the same food as in those first months at Izhevsk, in other words, almost nothing. I never knew that in the *real* army a soldier could be hungry day and night. We had to arise at 5 A.M. and run half naked for a quarter hour in the snow, then wash ourselves in the snow, get dressed and march to breakfast which consisted of tea and a piece of black bread. Then we were trained until lunchtime. Lunch was a piece of bread, a small amount of soup and some porridge. After two months of this training, the new soldiers were sent to the front to fight.

When the day for my departure arrived, I was suddenly called by the commandant of the unit who had found out that I was a tailor. He told me he had other plans for me. He put me to work for his family (which was stationed in the forest) to sew up clothes for his wife who worked in a bakery near the base. This was a godsend to me. During the days I worked in his house, and better times were here for me, since I now had food. Nights I spent in the military barracks, rooms with double bunks, which were so crowded that we could sleep only on our sides, like herrings in a barrel. Here I encountered the wild anti-Semitic feelings of other nationalities. This further reinforced my belief that the Jewish people had no friends. I believed, more than ever, that the future could lie only in a Jewish homeland,

towards which we had to strive with all our might. I cannot say that this prejudice was common to all the Russians, for here I met a combat veteran, Sasha Orlov, who after his hospital recovery period was sent to the reserve unit to train the new draftees. In him I found a very intelligent and humanistic friend. Before the war he had studied history and literature in a Siberian university. We found much in common. He tried to imbue me with his idealism about the Communist Party which he thought was trying to build a better future for all people, including the Jews. He taught me not to be so impulsive about going to the front because he had already been there a few times and he kept repeating that if a bullet was waiting for me it would not miss me, even to the last day of the war. I learned from him not to tempt fate and to allow things to take their course.

Suddenly, a squadron from our unit was sent to a farm collective about 40 miles from our base to prepare pressed hay for the front. My friend Orlov was selected as commander of this squadron and he included me in this group. We went on skis through the Siberian tundra and were stationed in farm houses, two soldiers per house. We had with us provisions such as frozen meat, dried potatoes and dry bread. We worked quite hard preparing hay which was frozen in storage and transferring it in bundles. We were there for three weeks until we received orders to return to our base. We learned we were included in the marching battalion, which meant we were being transferred to the front.



AGAIN WE WERE loaded on cattle cars, making up a train of about 100 cars. We started our journey to the West. On this journey I became very friendly with two soldiers, one a Jew named Petya Burstein, and the other an Ukrainian named Ilya Datsko. For a long time we were the three musketeers. As usual, we were all very hungry. We sold all our belongings in train stations in exchange for any food or vodka we could get. I thought it very sad that on the way to fight for our homeland we had to be hungry enough to sell our dearest possessions to survive long enough to get to the front to be killed.

When we reached the last point on the railroad, we started to march to the part of the Ukraine which used to have the largest Jewish population. We could find no signs that Jewish people ever lived there. We saw with our eyes what the Nazis had accomplished in the occupied territories. I started to realize what a fate my family must have met. Finally, we reached the village of Belzk in Bessarabia. From far away, we could hear the sound of the big guns and realized that we were not far from the actual fighting.

We were stationed and told we had to wait for the "buyers". These were officers who came to get reinforcements for units which had suffered many casualties. It

looked as if Providence was with me again in the form of the commander of our marching unit, Captain Boyko, the same one for whose family I sewed back at the base. He was a veteran artillery officer and when a request arrived for artillery specialists he was selected. He took me with him, and at my insistence, also my friends Petya and Ilya. To the "buyers" he presented the three of us as experienced artillery officers. We had told him we were completely lacking in artillery skills but he told us he would take the responsibility and that in no time we would know everything. I could see that during the months we had spent together at the base he had developed a great liking for me. He explained to me that if we went as foot soldiers we would have no chance of surviving beyond a few days. This was how we became a part of the 46th Heavy Artillery Brigade.

Under Captain Boyko's leadership, we underwent a crash course servicing the biggest guns which the army had. We were given special helmets with ear covers because no human ears could take the sounds for long. During subsequent battles, I realized what Captain Boyko had done for us. What we saw made me understand why Boyko had said that foot soldiers had no future. We witnessed terrible massacres, with thousands of casualties on the field, horrible wounds and cripples who were moved back to the East in special field ambulances. I reached the point where human suffering no longer affected me and also understood what my friend, Orlov, had meant when he told me not to rush to war. I started to think about my friends from Izhevsk and how they must have cursed me for urging them to join the fighting. I thought about how many of them were already

missing. However, I still thought I had done the right thing for my own conscience.

Being fortunate enough to be in this brigade, situated about 20 kilometers from the fighting line, we were still in danger day and night from the German guns and aerial attacks. We also incurred heavy casualties and were exhausted from the inhuman efforts required to sustain day and night battles. The Germans began to retreat and we were constantly on the move. In this manner, we went through a good part of Rumania and reached the Transylvanian Alps between Rumania and Hungary. There we realized what a picnic we had been having until now, with the beginning of the mountain campaign.

I must explain that the only way through the mountain was by way of one road which we had to climb. On the right side we had a stone wall and on the left side was a precipice. We had to move the heavy artillery and supply trucks along this winding one way road just wide enough for a truck to pass through. The road was also under fire from the German guns positioned above us. After each direct hit, the casualties had to be thrown off the road, down from the cliff. Hundreds of soldiers had to support the vehicles to keep them from sliding back down. Besides all this, it was January of 1945, and the beginning of heavy rains. We were drenched through, with no chance to rest or change clothes. At night we would find everything frozen to our skins. This situation continued for a three week period. After the slow, torturous trek, we finally reached the peak of the mountain but our troubles had just begun. The descent was even more difficult than the ascent. Everything started to roll down. When we stopped for rest during the nights, we

would fall down on the frozen ground. I remember that my friend Petya and I shared one greatcoat to lie on and another one to cover ourselves with. I could not believe how much a human being could tolerate. At times our greatest dream was to spend a night on a dry floor, with a roof over our heads. This seemed to us the height of luxury.

In these dreadful conditions of suffering we felt even worse because of the hatred towards us from the Russian soldiers, who were looking for scapegoats to blame their troubles upon. As Jews we were getting lessons that led my friend and me to make a promise to ourselves that if we survived the war we would know for sure where our future way lay. I found out that Petya had been raised in a Jewish nationalist environment in Rumania before the war, an environment similar to mine which existed prior to the Soviet regime after 1939.

While marching through Rumania, we found remains of the Jewish population, survivors of the German occupation. Because the Rumanian government was Hitler's ally, it had some independence from Nazi policies. In some cities we encountered intact Jewish communities. The local Jews told us they had survived due to the Rumanian authorities who had taken them under their protection.

We stopped at the city of Arad where we were told we would get two days rest. Petya and I decided to go for a walk through the city and look for surviving Jews. We eventually met two teenagers who brought us to a place where we found a whole group of Jewish survivors. They shared with us information which was previously unknown to us and quite a surprise. We found there existed a Jewish brigade fighting with the 8th British Army in

Italy against the Nazis. This brigade was formed in Palestine and was promised by the British that after victory it would be helped to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. We spent a day with our new friends. When we returned to join our unit we were in for another surprise. We found out the unit had received unexpected orders to move on to the front and thus, Petya and I found ourselves like orphans.

We started to wander in the direction of our unit's movement, which was not an easy task. After six days of hungry and cold traveling we were stopped by a military police patrol and brought before the Soviet authorities who were responsible for finding deserters. After spending a night in a cellar with a large group of other soldiers, we were brought up individually to see the commanding officer. He was a young major and, as I later found out, a Moscow Jew. When he checked my papers and discovered my Jewish nationality he became angry with me, unable to understand how a Jew could become a deserter. I explained to him our adventure and how we became separated from our unit. He believed us and told us we were fortunate that our disposition was in his hands. His responsibility was to establish penal battalions from deserting soldiers which were then sent to the most dangerous areas of combat. These were, as he phrased it, death battalions. The officer provided us with special passes officially stamped and with requests that we be assisted in finding our unit. We eventually found our unit not far from Budapest and were met by a very angry Captain Boyko who eventually forgave us because we obviously did try and had succeeded in finding our unit.

Because of the ongoing fighting in Budapest, our brigade was moved to the southern part of the city and we crossed into Czechoslovakia where our army met strong resistance from renegade Russian divisions which had deserted from the Soviet army at the beginning of the war and were fighting on the German side. They realized they could expect no mercy from the Soviets and thus were fighting to the bitter end.

One morning we had to cross the Moravi River on our way to Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia. All the bridges had been destroyed and we crossed on a temporary bridge which had been built by our sappers. This trip took place under murderous fire from the Germans. Suddenly the bridge took a direct hit and we found ourselves in the freezing river. To this day, I cannot explain how I reached the banks of the river. We lost many men as well as equipment. The march continued in the freezing February weather. We were unable to change or dry out our clothing until we stopped in Bratislava three days later for rest and the resupplying of men and equipment.

After that rest, we started on a new offensive. That morning started as usual with a gun duel between us and the Germans. I remember that Petya was sent away with a group of soldiers for new supplies. Suddenly I heard a terrible sound and thought the world was coming to an end. After this I did not remember anything else.

When I came to my senses, I found myself in a hospital room. I was told by the doctors that I had arrived there six days ago, days which I had spent in a coma. No one had held out hope that I would come out of it. After I underwent tests the medics were amazed that no part

of my body suffered any significant damage and I had full use of my faculties. This was explained as a lucky break which occurs very seldom. I spent the next ten days recuperating but still suffered from severe dizzy spells and lower back pains. But apparently at this point in the war, there was not much time given for recuperation due to the severe shortage of manpower at the front.

After undergoing another medical examination, I was sent back to my brigade. On the way there occurred a miraculous event, the kind which usually seems to happen only in novels. It could have happened only in wartime when anything is possible. I was standing on the platform of the railroad station waiting for the train to take me to my brigade. Suddenly, a train arrived from the opposite direction, from Hungary and stopped at the platform. As if in a dream, through the train windows I saw the familiar faces of two of my friends and neighbors from Pinsk, Saul Mednik and Hershel Chatok. After we greeted each other, they told me a fascinating story. They were travelling from Poland to a kibbutz in Konstancia, Rumania, a kibbutz which was a part of the Bricha movement geared towards the escape of Jewish survivors from Eastern Europe to Palestine. They did not have individual passports, only a collective passport for a group of ten people. It was as if Providence had arranged our meeting because there were only nine left in their group, as one of the original ten had suffered a broken leg and had to be left in a hospital. Thus, they had room for me to join their group. This appeared to be an answer to all my dreams. I was tempted to join them, but did not want to take the risk of being caught as a deserter and getting shot at the very end of the war

which I had managed to survive so far. I said goodbye to my two friends and we separated in tears, hoping to meet again. (This eventually did come to pass when I met Saul many years later in New York.)

I rejoined my brigade in Austria, not far from Vienna. When I met Petya he told me shocking news. In the explosion which has knocked me out we had lost our friend Ilya, and our beloved Captain Boyko had lost a leg and had been sent home.

The war was still raging on. By the end of April 1945 we finally reached the German border near Tyrol. We could sense already the dying resistance of the German army. Finally arrived May 9, 1945. The terrible war came to an end. I had lived to see the day of which I had dreamed for over four and a half years and I thanked G-d that I had survived without a scratch.



IN THE FOLLOWING days I started to think about my future; about where I would go from here, knowing for certain that I was alone, without a soul close to me. Life was going on. We were stationed in abandoned German houses and for the first time in years were able to live in civilized conditions and fed with real food. I think that grief brought Petya and myself to start indulging in alcohol, which we believed would dull our pain and agony.

Our quiet life did not last long. In mid June, tension suddenly developed between the Soviets and their former British allies regarding the civil war in Greece. The Soviets tried to take over Greece and England resisted this attempt. It looked as if war between the former allies was a possibility. The 62nd Army to which we belonged received an order to move to the Bulgarian-Turkish border. We left Austria on a 1,800 kilometer march during the terribly hot Balkan summer, but again I was fortunate. I traveled by truck because before our departure from Austria, several of us had been sent to work in a tailor shop catering to the officers of the army headquarters. This resulted in a dozen of us being able to procure truck transport, in contrast to the soldiers who had to suffer on foot. We moved during the night due

to the awful daytime heat. The days we spent in the forest, awaiting the arrival of the marching troops who looked terrible, like walking skeletons, burned from the sun and dropping from fatigue.

During the six weeks of travel we went through Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. By this time the tensions between the two allies had lessened and we were directed towards Rumania where we finished our journey in the city of Galati, an important port on the Dunai River at the mouth of the Black Sea. We were stationed in a former Rumanian military base. Again I was fortunate due to my trade. The tailor shop was located outside the base in a private house. We had no military obligations. Our only requirement was to obtain a pass granting permission to leave the area. We had a new man in our tailor shop, a Polish Jew named Volodya, whom we disliked immediately for his arrogance, selfishness and stinginess.

Galati was the second largest city in Rumania and had the greatest concentration of surviving Jews in that country. This had a special attraction for us and prompted us to visit the city. Due to our good standing with the supervising officer of our shop, Petya and I managed to get a pass on a Saturday at the beginning of August. We first found our way to the central synagogue where we were astonished by the glamour and richness of the place and the hundreds of elegantly dressed Jewish men and women. In our minds, we compared their lives to the destinies of the Polish and Russian Jews who had perished in the Holocaust. After the end of the Sabbath services, we, as Jewish soldiers in Russian uniforms, were a big attraction for the Rumanian Jews. We were ap-

proached by a rich looking man named Leo (whose last name shall be left out) who invited us for the Sabbath dinner at his home. There we met his wife and two teenage daughters, as well as his visiting niece, Bunya, from Iasi. We spent an exceptional day with this wonderful family and before departure we promised, at their insistence, to visit them again.

The following week I read in the Moscow official paper *Pravda* a communique about a treaty between the Soviet Union and the new Polish republic and the repatriation from the Soviet Union of former Polish citizens. This could give me a chance to free myself from the Russian army in which it appeared I might otherwise have to stay for a long time. By the same token, it would also get me out of Russia. I composed a letter requesting transfer to the Polish army because of my former Polish citizenship and gave the request to my commanding officer to be forwarded to the higher authorities. I knew I was taking a risk, perhaps playing with fire, but at that stage of my life I had little regard for danger and was willing to take chances.

During the next few weeks I forgot about my request and continued with my daily life. Petya and I managed occasionally to get leave to the city and visit our friends. This eventually led to friendship between me and Leo's visiting niece. I started to spend time in discussions with Leo, whom I discovered to be a dedicated Zionist. He confided in me about his work in the illegal Bricha organization and his efforts to get Jewish soldiers of the Russian army involved in his work by smuggling them out of Eastern Europe to join the Jewish brigade, which at the time was stationed in Austria. Leo further elaborated about the

coming armed struggle that would be necessary in establishing the Jewish homeland and told me about the many soldiers who had gone to take part in this endeavor.

At the end of August I was called to the brigade headquarters. There I faced a very angry colonel who confronted me with my request to be transferred to the Polish army. He told me I could be courtmartialled for this deed and end up in a Siberian gulag for life. I did not lose my composure and instead showed him the *Pravda* article about repatriation. After he read it, I realized that he did not know about the treaty. He then dismissed me until further notice.

At the beginning of September 1945 Petya, Volodya and I got a pass for the first day of Rosh Hashanah to visit the city. After the Holy Days services, we went, as usual, to Leo's home where we were already treated like part of the family. This time I met Bunya's brother, David, with whom I instantly became friends. David turned out also to be part of the Bricha organization in which he played a big role. After he learned about my past and my whereabouts during the war years, David told me he saw me as the right person to perform an important mission for their movement. He told me about the hundreds of Polish Jews suffering in the Soviet gulags, not far from Izhevsk, who desperately needed help to get well after they were to be freed according to the agreement between Poland and Russia. This would require great financial efforts. Sums of money and lists of names had to be delivered to operatives in cities near that area. He entreated me to take on this task because I had the legal means of entering the Soviet Union and therefore to complete that mission. I told David I had to think this

over because I had set my mind on other things, namely to get to Palestine and take part in the historical achievement of the rebirth of our nation. I promised that after I gained my freedom I would visit him in Iasi before my departure and give him my answer. We spent a festive holiday and by the end of the day were joined by a group of Jewish youths who came to visit the girls. We were invited to an evening dance party at their Maccabee Club. I realized our pass was effective only until 8 P.M. With that reckless attitude I had developed during the war, I decided to forge the date on the pass for the next evening. Petya decided to stay with me, but Volodya left, afraid of possible repercussions. We spent a wonderful night in a traditional Jewish atmosphere. I also found out that night that Bunya was in love with me. She insisted that I visit her parents when I got the chance. I found myself getting involved in all kinds of situations for which I didn't plan. Even though she was a wonderful girl, I could not find in myself an answer to her feelings. I had also made different plans for my future.

The second day of Rosh Hashanah we spent with Leo's family. At the end of that day we walked to the tram station surrounded by our friends. Suddenly, we were stopped by a military patrol and were told it was against army regulations to fraternize with civilians. Then the patrol decided to check our passes. The officer in charge brought to my attention the fact that the pass had been tampered with. He decided to take us to the military commander to verify our actual leave. I found out that we were in deep trouble because after our immediate supervisors were contacted, the military commander was told that we had been declared missing for one day and

proclaimed as deserters. Again, we found ourselves in a cellar, surrounded by drunken sailors from the Dunai flotilla. In the morning, arrived an officer from our brigade who took us back. We were brought before the chief of staff and the political commander of the brigade. To our dismay we found Volodya there. He had been arrested because his name was on the pass along with ours and his claim of returning on time did not help him. We were sent to the military stockade under arrest until the court martial. I considered that I was going to pay a very high price for a few days of enjoyment, but Providence was again with me. On the fifth day of our internment, Volodya and I were called out to pack our belongings and after saying goodbye to Petya, who did not understand why he was left alone, and whom I never saw again, we were brought to the army headquarters. We were informed by a general that we were going to be transferred to the Polish army. It looked as if my request had resulted in orders from Moscow to transfer former Polish citizens based in Rumania to the Polish army.

At the gathering point we met hundreds of our compatriots. After two weeks, we were served with departure papers to Polish cities of our choice. I selected the city of Lodz because it was the closest one to the German border, which would be the closest for the journey to the West. After receiving food rations for the journey, I found myself a free man, ready to travel. Thus began to come alive my dream to free myself from Russian oppression.

In the person of Volodya I found myself a sidekick who did not want to leave me because he was afraid of getting lost, as he had no idea where to go. To my

consternation, I could not get rid of him. When I explained to Volodya that I had personal plans, he insisted he would do whatever I did, and I was stuck with him as with a baby.

My first decision was to visit Bunya's family in Iasi because I owed her an explanation and could not leave without saying goodbye. I also owed David an answer. We arrived in town during Succoth. We were received like members of the family and urged to spend the holidays with them. I found out that Bunya's father was a very rich merchant with large business enterprises in the city. It appeared that Bunya had given her parents the impression that we had a serious understanding between us, because in a conversation with her father I was told that the family had decided to liquidate all their belongings and to leave Rumania forever, not seeing any future for the Jewish people. He asked me join their family in this move. I thanked Bunya's father for his trust and the feelings the family had shown towards me, then told him about my past, and of my decision to once more see my hometown and make sure about survivors. I told him that when I left for the war, I had left behind a pregnant wife and therefore was not yet free to go. Even though my hometown had been liberated in July 1944 all my enquiries about family survivors had resulted in negative answers. However, I had to go make sure for myself.

Even though my departure papers had specified definite points of travel which avoided Russian entry, I decided anyway to visit Pinsk. After long deliberation with myself, I also decided to take on David's mission and informed him of this. With David's help, we sewed up in my greatcoat a list of names and addresses and a large

amount of money in dollars which in Russia could be exchanged for a tremendous amount in rubles on the illegal market. I had to memorize two addresses in two Siberian cities to which I had to make deliveries and where I would be given further instructions. Before my departure, David again reminded me about the dangers I and these people were facing. I told him I understood fully what I was undertaking and was not afraid because I did not then place too much value on my life. I knew about the predicament of the people who needed our help because I remembered my close friends and their condition following release from prison camps.

The next morning I said goodbye to this remarkable family. It was a very sad occasion for me because I realized what an excellent opportunity I had allowed to pass me by. But I felt I had no choice. I think that the main factor in my refusal was my dream to once more see my hometown and my hidden hope of finding someone left in my family.

I started my journey back to Russia, but not by myself, for I still had Volodya, who refused to remain behind. He followed me like a puppy. I had to get rid of him sometime during my travels. When I told him I was returning to Russia on my way to Poland he told me he had no desire to return to Poland and would rather remain in Russia. We reached the small border town of Adinkata. I realized I had no legal means of crossing the border. With the help of the Jewish owner of a small tavern which served the Russian officers crossing into Russia, I made contact with a Russian captain. After we showed him our papers with destinations for the Polish army listed on them to prove we were not spies and

assured him that our purpose was to visit our hometown for the last time, we gave him a certain amount of money, and he put us on a train car filled with war cripples which was bound for the Russian city of Tarnopol. From here we travelled through territory filled with bands of Ukrainian resisters who were still fighting the Soviets for their independence. Dressed in Russian uniforms we were in danger.

Part III



IT TOOK US a week to reach Pinsk. Finally, after four and a half years I had come back to my hometown. I will never forget my excitement when I walked out from the railroad station into the familiar streets of my childhood. They looked deserted and many had houses missing. Finally I came upon the street on which I had grown up. I found my house destroyed; all that was left were four walls surrounded by barbed wire. Our beautiful backyard, which used to have cherry trees, looked like a battlezone, with deep trenches. I saw no signs of life, no one to ask about what had happened. I realized once and for all that I was left without hope of finding anybody who would ever care for me. I sat on the curb, as if in a cemetery, unable to stop crying. Hours passed, yet I could not bring myself to leave this place. I was afraid that with my departure I would break the last connection to my past.

After I had sat for hours on the curb alongside my destroyed home, I was suddenly approached by a man. Upon seeing my state of desperation, he invited me and Volodya to his home, which was around the corner. His home in Rogachev had been destroyed and he had moved his family to Pinsk where he had found work as manager of a shoe repair shop. His name was Isaac

Tunkel. I never imagined at that time that this man would become the grandfather of my children.

After a few hours of rest, Volodya and I decided to go to the railroad terminal where we thought to spend the night. Lately, railroad stations had become our hotels. As we walked we talked in Yiddish. Suddenly, a woman stopped us, told us she was also Jewish and asked us to tell her about ourselves. After she found out that I had returned to my hometown and had no place to stay, she invited us to her home which she shared with her sister and her mother. It was getting late in the evening and this family insisted we spend the night at their home. We found out they were also newcomers to Pinsk where they had found jobs and lodgings.

The next morning I informed Volodya that I was planning to return to Poland and that he was on his own. When Volodya decided not to return to Poland, he contacted the military authorities in Pinsk, who sent him back to the Russian army in a unit stationed in Pinsk. I was finally a free man, able to plan my next move on my own.

My next step was to visit the home of my wife's family. After walking long miles to the farm, I came to the place where their house used to be. There was no sign of it, as if it had vanished. When I approached the nearest neighbor, I recognized a brother and sister, Misha and Dzenia Poleshuk, who proceeded to tell me the sad story of the last months of suffering that my wife and her family went through. I also found out that two months after my departure, my wife gave birth to a girl. They had spent the winter at their home, but in the spring of 1942 were removed by the Gestapo to the Pinsk ghetto where they

shared lodgings with my father's family. There the two families met their end.

I returned to Pinsk and spent the second night with the same family. I was filled with such a sadness and desperation that I actually lost all desire and will to plan for my future. I had to decide whether it was worth to go on living and for what reason. I am sure now that only the fact of the mission I was entrusted with and the dependence of many people upon my performance saved my sanity and gave me the will to go on.

In the morning I had to decide on which way it would be best for me to reach the Siberian area. The only documentation I had was papers providing permission to join the Polish army, which I was already rather late in contacting. I realized I could not use this document for travel in Russia, but my dilemma was that if I contacted the Soviet authorities I would again be drawn into the Russian army, a possibility which was against all my wishes and plans. By the end of that day's planning, I was not any smarter than in the morning, and decided to follow the old adage, "The morning is smarter than the evening". I decided to wait until the next morning before making any decisions.

The next morning, like so many times before in my life, Providence was again good to me. On the radio I suddenly heard the official announcement about the first discharges from the Soviet armed forces, a group in which I would also be included. Suddenly, it was clear to me what I had to do. I immediately contacted the military commander of Pinsk, showed him my Polish papers, and told him that I had decided instead to remain in the Soviet Union and be discharged from the Russian army.

I was informed that according to regulations I would be provided with a railroad ticket to the city from which I was taken into the army. I asked for a ticket to Izhevsk, a destination which would fit in with my plans. This would be a place for me to establish my activities with the support of people whom I trusted and who had contacts there to provide me with papers for further travel. As I had previously mentioned, during the Izhevsk years, there had been established a Pinsk mutual support network.

The last thing for me to do in Pinsk was to visit the site of the mass graves of the town's Jewish population in a forest about five kilometers from Pinsk. After saying goodbye to Pinsk, for what I thought was the last time, I started on my journey east.



IT WAS MUCH more difficult to travel than I had expected. Train schedules were chaotic. There were no express routes. Often one had to change trains and spend days in stations waiting for connections. In those days, hundreds of thousands were travelling. It looked as if an entire nation was on the move. Actually, I was travelling the same route as in 1941, but this time I was on my own and completely responsible for finding routes and provisions. The latter was the worst responsibility. You could not, for money, buy any food. The only source of food at stations was from farmers selling very small quantities of bread and sausage. These farmers were constantly being attacked by wild mobs and only the strongest and luckiest got away with something to eat. After eight days of travelling, I finally reached the Tartar Republic and the city of Kazan. There we were stranded for several days due to disruption of railroad service. I spend long nights in the freezing cold of the station, without food and frozen to my bones. On the third day I found a new connection to Izhevsk. By that time I had come down with a fever, with a few days of travel still remaining until my final destination. I thought it would be extremely ironic to have survived some of the worst

conditions on the front only to die of pneumonia before accomplishing my task.

After a few days, in this terrible state of health, I reached Izhevsk. I was in pain, unable to breathe, and delirious from fever. I was afraid to ask for medical help because I did not want anyone to discover the money and lists I was secretly carrying. By inhuman effort, I reached a place where I knew I could find a friend of mine, Osher, whom I could trust with my life. He also had the connections I needed. Osher worked for the city philharmonic. Unfortunately, when I arrived I was informed that he was on a tour and would not be back until the following week. It was getting dark, and since October is already wintertime in this area, I was faced with the prospect of freezing to death during the night. I made my final decision; to look for help from a person to whom I had not wanted to be obligated to. However, this was an emergency, affecting not only myself, but many other people.

There was a Russian girl named Galina with whom I had had a stormy relationship during my last year in Izhevsk. I had broken up with her several times because she insisted on marriage although I had made clear to her several times that I would not marry a non-Jewish woman and that I was also not free to marry until I knew what had happened to my first family. Galina was the person I now sought. By the time I reached her home and faced her, I was already half dead. I was in no condition to explain anything to her, but she was ready to help me just as I knew she would.

This Russian woman saved my life. That night I came down with pneumonia. She found a doctor to attend to

me and managed to get me antibiotics, a feat which at that time was a miracle in itself. After ten days, I recovered and was ready to pursue my mission. Before I left, Galina inquired about my future plans. I told her about my decision to leave the country and she stated that she would be ready to join me in any undertaking in any place. It was sad that I could not repay her for all her kindness, because the bottom line was that I did not love her. After my first disappointing marriage, I pledged to myself never to marry again without love.

That day I contacted my friend Osher whom we jokingly called "Ambassador" because he served on the Polish Committee established in Ishevsk for the needs of former Polish citizens who were receiving relief aid from Western countries. The Soviet government tried to please the Allies. I entrusted Osher with information about my mission and told him what help I needed from him. At that time one needed special permits to travel from one city to another, and Osher could provide me with all the necessary documents for this purpose. I trusted him because he was a special kind of man whose ideals coincided with mine. Osher eventually became one of the first to arrive in Palestine. He gave his life in the 1948 War for Independence.

I moved into his room and after a few days he provided me with permits for round trip travel to two Siberian cities. I made my contacts in those cities. My first contact was a man named Simon who had been doing this type of work since 1940 when he arrived to help the Zionist prisoners in the Soviet gulags. He told about the miseries of these people, the poor physical state they were in, and the tremendous effort required to make

them fit for eventual travel to the West as part of the repatriation deal with Poland. I could see that the money I had brought was a godsend to these people. When I told this man about my plans to leave Russia as soon as possible he told me that according to his understanding I was to remain in the Soviet Union until the end of the repatriation period. He told me that there would be established two central points for handling all the procedures, one in Byelorussia in Pinsk and the other in the Ukrainian city of Rovno. I was to select one of these places and settle myself there to help the newly freed arrivals after the expiration of the registration date for repatriation.

In spite of my decision never to return to Pinsk I selected my hometown as my base because of my knowledge of the territory and the people. After saying goodbye to Simon I returned to Izhevsk since he could not provide me with a pass to Pinsk. My only hope for a pass rested with Osher. However, not even Osher could get this permit for me, because it could be issued only by invitation from the Pinsk authorities. Suddenly, I was stranded in Izhevsk, with no way out. To further complicate matters, I began to have spells of returning fever and pains in my right side, a leftover from pneumonia. After I had spent a few days at Osher's, there suddenly arrived my good friend, Chaim Karolinsky, on his way from the Far East where he had been discharged from the army. He was on his way to Pinsk. He decided to visit Izhevsk, where he had spent a few years with us before going into the army. We now had a new roommate.

When I had arrived in Izhevsk a few weeks earlier, I had been issued a passport and a military book with

which every citizen was required to be registered on the day of an arrival in any city. The night after Chaim's arrival we heard a knock on the door and upon opening it, faced a pale looking Galina who informed me that the NKVD (state security police) was looking for me and had conducted a search for some papers in her home. After they had interrogated her, she had told them that I had left Izhevsk a few weeks ago. I was touched by her loyalty and bravery, but I still could not repay her in the way she wished most. She then said goodbye as if she understood it was for ever. We now had to look for a hiding place for me because even with my trust in Galina I could not take chances with how far the police might go in their search. That night Chaim and I moved in with another friend from our Pinsk circle who was working for the city circus and who lived on the premises. We decided to stay there until a better solution came along.

After long deliberations, going over all possibilities, I finally came up with the right solution. Years earlier when we lived in Izhevsk, there had been a work battalion headed by a major with whom Chaim had close business dealings. At that time Chaim had worked for a restaurant and had access to food supplies which he was able to use in trade with this major. My plan was to contact this major and have him obtain discharge papers for me from the battalion in return for whatever favor he chose. I approached the major with a bottle of vodka, and after some rounds of jolly drinking, I was able to achieve my goal in return for a large amount of money. Thus, in a period of two months I was discharged from Pinsk to Izhevsk and then back to Pinsk again.



IN THE BEGINNING of November 1945 Chaim and I left Izhevsk. He had discharge papers with a ticket to Pinsk and I now had a soldier's discharge paper, a ticket and also a passport and a military book. If I had been apprehended with these documents on my person I would be charged with the worse crime in the Soviet Union because I was travelling with false documentation.

While it had been difficult to travel to Izhevsk, the journey back was a nightmare. One had to fight mobs in order to enter a train. Many times we were left in a freezing station. After a few days of struggle we finally made it to Moscow where we decided to rest for a while. We had the address of a friend from Pinsk who lived in a dormitory. When we came to him, he found us a place to sleep. We then went sightseeing. We were thinking that this might be the last time we would ever be in Moscow and that we deserved a little vacation after all our hardships. We visited the part of the Kremlin which had been designated as a museum, and the Red Square with Lenin's Tomb. We then spent a whole day in the Tretyakovsky Gallery where we admired the works of great masters of painting. The most gratifying experience we had in Moscow was our visit to the Jewish National Theatre. As discharged soldiers, we

were admitted to a performance for which one normally had to get tickets months in advance. We enjoyed a traditional Jewish spectacle called *Freilas* and admired the performance of the greatest Jewish stars of the time such as Mihoils, Zuskin and the rest of the ensemble. We were amazed by the strong Jewish nationalistic tone of the play. I remember saying afterwards to Chaim, "I'm afraid for these people." This outing was one of the best days we had had in a long, long time. (Five years later Stalin, in his wild paranoia about the dangers of Jewish nationalism, destroyed all the best of the Jewish actors, writers, and intellectuals that the Soviet Union had.)

We left Moscow on our way towards Kiev. The travelling nightmare worsened. We could not get aboard a train for several days. I remember leaving Moscow standing on the boarding steps of a train in the bitter frost hoping to eventually get inside the train car. We continued to travel outside the car for about ten hours, holding on for dear life with frozen fingers until we reached the city of Brest. Finally, the next day, we arrived in Kiev and visited some of our other Pinsk friends, people who were by now spread all over the country. We spent two days in Kiev with our friends who tried to marry us off to Ukrainian girls with promises of good jobs and lodgings in Kiev. We thanked them for all their good intentions and left for the final lap of our journey to Pinsk.

After arriving in Pinsk I went through the same suffering as I had when I first returned after the war. I started to regret my decision in selecting Pinsk as my operating base because the suffering was unbearable. Chaim experienced similar emotions as he also had lost

a large family and a beautiful wife whom he had married only a few months before the war.

Life was going on. I had to settle somewhere and find my contact in the mixed Russian-Polish repatriation commission. I had been told by Simon that my contact would give me further instructions. The first two nights in Pinsk, Chaim and I slept on the benches in the railroad station. The days we spent roaming the streets looking for new arrivals; former Pinsk residents who had begun to return from all over. These were mostly people who had spent the war in the 7th Army, or in the partisan groups in the forests, as well as, for the most part, prisoners freed from the gulags. We found a cheap kitchen that had been established in the main square to serve the hungriest, in which group we two were now included. This kitchen became a meeting place and a hideaway from the bitter winter cold.

One morning as I entered this kitchen, I found there a great surprise in the person of my former sister-in-law, Lyuba, who had served as a nurse in the military hospitals during the war. She told me she was sharing a small apartment with another woman, Lena, who was discharged from the army. Before the war, Lena had lived not far from Pinsk. With the two women lived Lyuba's surviving uncle, Manya, who had been recently discharged from the Soviet army. Their apartment became my temporary home. Chaim found a temporary place with my dear friend, Sasha Klitenik, who had arrived after his army discharge and found his home still intact.

In the following weeks, there were continual new arrivals and returnees. Among them was Sasha's brother,

Isaac, who was thought to be dead. He had spent the years fighting in the Russian army. We all became a close group of friends.

I eventually registered for repatriation to assure myself of the possibility of leaving Russia as the registration period was to expire on December 31, 1945. I was still waiting for someone to arrive and help me find my contact. To my pleasant surprise, in the beginning of December, I was approached by the same Simon with whom I had dealt in Siberia. He was on his way out of the country and introduced me to a Polish member of the repatriation commission with whom I would have to deal in the future. I was told to await another man who would contact me and who would supervise my activities. I then said goodbye to Simon, one of the finest men I have ever encountered. When I mentioned to Simon, before his departure, of my desire to leave with the ongoing emigration he told me to wait for the arriving man and his orders. The next day he left with the first group of repatriates, the beginning of the great exodus of tens of thousands of Jews to the free world.



4

MEANWHILE, I HAD to establish myself. I needed to start working in order to support myself, and also because in Russia one cannot just live and not work; those without jobs are considered parasites and can be sent to the gulags. My friend, Sasha, decided to stay in Pinsk because his brother did not want to travel. The brother said that he had had enough of wandering for the past 5 years, and that made up Sasha's mind. I told Sasha we had an offer to open up a tailor shop for the city's commercial organization. We decided to take that job and started to work. I moved into the shop, got an old sofa and found some privacy. It was better than sleeping on the floor in Lyuba's room. I still had not given up my dream of leaving Russia. I decided that I would get out with the departures of May 1946 with my free spirit intact. Nobody would order me to stay for life in this slavery and I would do what I could. With that decision, I began to feel more at peace with myself, and went on with my daily life.

In the middle of December 1945 arrived an old friend of mine, Moishe Czyz, who came to meet his cousin Lena, Lyuba's roommate. Every day there were survivors arriving. Czyz came from the occupation forces in Germany and had brought with him a large amount

of leather which he wanted to sell. He asked me to find a buyer as I knew the local people. I then remembered the manager of the shoe shop around the corner from my old home, the first Jewish man who had approached me during my returning visit home. I went to the shop and told him about the leather. He then met my friend and the two concluded a deal.

During this time, I had been feeling poorly as my sickness from the Izhevsk days kept returning in the form of colds and fever. After I returned to the shoe shop to help deliver the leather, the manager of the shoe shop, Isaac Tunkel, noticed my condition and offered to get me some medication for relief. He told me his daughter worked in a pharmacy so they always had pills, which were not easy to get at that time. I followed his advice and went to his home. When his wife opened the door she became pale, as if she was seeing a ghost. I later found out that I bore a resemblance to her brother who was lost in the war. I told her that her husband had sent me to get aspirin. Then I saw their daughter, and my life changed in one day.

I realized then that I had met the girl of my dreams. In the short time that I spent in their house I discovered a gentle and kind girl with whom I felt on the same wavelength. When I left, I was in a turmoil, as if to my life had been added a new dimension. That night I could not sleep because of the new to me feelings. I had met in my years many girls, but no one had been able to grab my soul like Jenny. Suddenly, I had a big problem. I felt I had no future without that girl and to my dismay could not figure out how this had hit me so fast. I tried to figure out where this would fit in with all my activities and

future plans. Then I decided to let developments take their course. I could not get Jenny out of my mind; it became an obsession. After a few days I invited her to a movie. I still remember the title, *The Young Guard*, about the underground struggle against the Nazi occupation. In the following weeks I began a pursuit of that girl. I followed her during every free moment I could find. I remember once coming to her home and being told that she went to get her passport. I then went to the militia to join her. I was so taken with her that it became a major part of my thinking.

This was an extremely busy period of my life, as we were living thru an electrifying time with all the happenings that were occurring around us. Every day new people were arriving, some old friends, and some people we were seeing for the first time. Pinsk, at that time, was like a transit point on the way to Poland. We had to organize relief and assistance. Before Simon left the country, he had brought with him a man by the name of Jonny, whom he left to help me. Jonny had a large amount of money and established himself in an attic apartment in the center of town. Across the street from the apartment we discovered an intact synagogue, the former home of the Stolin Hasidim, and with the help of my friend, Chaim Karolinsky, and a few others we established a religious board to keep the shul open for all kinds of services. We found an old Jewish couple, survivors from the ghetto, who were able to perform as a rabbi, and we had a working Jewish community, where all newcomers could find a meeting place.

During the months of December 1945 and January 1946 the Jewish population in Pinsk grew to the

thousands, only to diminish thereafter when the mass exodus to Palestine by way of Poland commenced. I remember Jonny's rooms were always filled to capacity. I worked in the tailor shop with my dear friend, Sasha, and had complete freedom as the boss. Our shop was like a hotel for the needy. Sometimes at night I had three or four people sleeping on the tables and even on the floor. We had a stove and always there was somebody cooking something.

I started to use my contact with the repatriation commission for arrivals after January 1, 1946 when the registration for exit was closed. Jonny was receiving the oncoming flow of fugitives who had come out of the prisons and the army and who had missed the legal deadline for departure. My task was to provide them with exit passes which my friend at the commission was producing. Our shop expanded with a few tailors from the returning Pinsk citizens and we needed them to produce because I was always on the go.

Meanwhile, I started to spend more time with Jenny, and her home eventually became a welcome place for my friends too. We became, in that winter, a very close group that included the Klitenik brothers, Chaim, and a new worker in our shop named Lazar. Jenny's parents gave us much attention, with her father, Isaac, bringing all kinds of food that was then scarce and her mother, Ida, cooking and serving for the whole bunch. When I look back on that winter of 1945-6 it seems to me the most exciting period of my life.

The time was coming for me to decide about my personal future. My main desire was to leave the country and proceed with my goal to reach the final destination

for the struggle of my people. I was now faced with a double dilemma. First, I had instructions to remain in Pinsk for further activities after the end of the exodus. This did not bother me much because I had made up my mind that no power would hold me forever in that oppressiveness. However, there was now a second problem. By that time I found myself so deeply in love with Jenny that I could not imagine any life without her. I started to explore with her the possibility of leaving the country with me, but I found her determined not to leave her family, a determination that I understood would not crumble. I could see that it was not easy for a young girl raised in the Russian tradition to go into a different kind of life and to sever all ties with those closest to her. I knew that if I wanted to have a life with Jenny I would have to give up my dreams and stay in that oppressive environment which I hated with a passion. In our group the same deliberations were going on; who would stay and who would leave. I found out that the Klitenik brothers made their decision to stay in Pinsk with Isaac winning the fight because he found himself too tired to start on new adventures. My friend Chaim suddenly abandoned our shared dream because he had met a girl named Nina, the daughter of a woman in our synagogue who was very active in the social work around the shul. As for myself, I could not come to a final decision, for in that period of time I had become very close with my dead wife's uncle Manya and his close friends, a woman named Dora and a man named Iser Kruglin with whom we registered for the repatriation in December 1945 and made then a pledge to leave the country together. I was too torn among many different emotions to make up my mind definitely.



HOWEVER, SOMETHING HAPPENED which gave me a push to decide. There was an old time native of Pinsk named Kozh, a ghetto survivor who lived in the main street and made a hobby of going to the post office and collecting all the mail from former Pinsk inhabitants which had started to come in with inquiries about survivors after the liberation of the city. My friend Sasha told me there were sacks of mail lying in the attic of Kozh's apartment. I decided one day to spend time looking thru the hundreds of letters, and after a long search Sasha found a letter with my father's name and address on it. After I read the letter I found out to my joy that my sister, Yetta, was alive in the Siberian town of Shadzinsk and looking for family survivors. I think this was a reward from G-d for my second return to Pinsk and for the work that I was doing. It is hard to explain the emotions I experienced when I found out that someone else from my large family had survived the Holocaust, that I was no longer alone. I sent a telegram to my sister and started to wait for a letter. After receiving that letter I learned of her adventures during the war. She had married a Polish Jew, and they were preparing for repatriation to Poland within six weeks. I immediately decided to go visit them and there to make my future plans.

I took leave from work and again went through a difficult journey during the February–cold Russian winter. It took me eight terrible days to cross the hungry and cold land in my combat uniform and falling–apart boots. My feet were frozen from water and snow. I cannot figure out now where I found the stamina and energy for all these escapades. Finally I reached that frozen Siberian town and had a tearful reunion with my sister. Both of us had thought the other dead. I spent 10 days there and they insisted I join them on the journey West and not return to Pinsk, with the argument that as the only survivors we should not separate. I examined my feelings in light of the new situation, but with every passing day I felt such a longing to see Jenny again that I knew what my answer to my sister was going to be. At the end of the tenth day I announced to my crying sister that I was returning to Pinsk and the reason for it. I told them about Jenny and that my decision came to remaining in Russia because I could not see a life without that girl. I said goodbye to them for what looked like forever and went back on the torturous journey, remembering how many times I had already crossed the width of this colossal country.

After returning to Pinsk and getting Jenny's final answer that she will never leave her family, I decided that I had no resolve to start a future without her. I had to start thinking about living in Pinsk and getting on with my life and its many difficult aspects. I knew at that point that my activities were becoming public knowledge and I needed to consider the possible dangers from the state security organs which might some day catch up with me. I discovered about my fame when one night my friend

and co-worker Lazar woke me up and tearfully begged me to help him leave Russia. Lazar was living in the shop with me and sharing my sofa. He knew that I was the one to help him. I realized then that I was on thin ice, something I vaguely realized from the beginning when I started on my adventure in Rumania in that August of 1945. Eventually I helped Lazar to leave Russia, and he later settled in Canada where Jenny and I eventually visited him.

Lazar received a good-bye party in Jenny's home where her parents organized a large gathering for our group of friends. Afterwards we put Lazar on the train to freedom. I had arranged so many departures, but none for myself. I was thinking about the Biblical story of Jacob falling in love with Rachel and agreeing to serve seven years in slavery to marry her. I was hoping that for me it would be only 7 years also. I could resign myself to that, just not for life. Remaining in Pinsk for sentimental reasons, I moved into a small room in the back of my father's ruined house where a Jewish family lived, and I hoped to eventually fix the rest of the house. I could, at that time, have found an empty apartment in good condition, but felt better in that room close to my past. Every day more people were leaving for Poland and Pinsk started to empty out from the returning Jews who now had no desire to continue living on that bloody piece of earth.



ON JUNE 4, 1946 Jenny and I got married. The celebration consisted of a day off and dinner for my friends at the home of Jenny's parents. The next day we went to work and that was our honeymoon. My little room became our apartment, with a bed on a sack of straw. We shared the kitchen with the family living next to us, and that is how we began our new life.

Life was very difficult, with constant shortages of all necessities. We both kept working until Jenny had to stop to give birth to our first child on March 17, 1947. We named our daughter, Fayge, (Fannie) after my dear mother. We still lived in that little room, arranging a bed for our little girl on crates we found in the store. I was thinking what miracles life can perform in the name of love which can transport somebody from one extreme to another. I gave up all my dreams, but it was worth it for me, because I realized that only once in a lifetime can you be lucky enough to meet a person for whom sacrifices are worthwhile.

In the summer of 1946 the repatriation period came to an end. The commission closed my contact, said goodbye to me and for the last time offered me a chance to leave. Jenny did not want to hear about it. It looked as if I was trapped in Russia forever, but I had no regrets.

I knew that it was a voluntary decision on both my part and Jenny's. Soon after our marriage, friends followed us to do the same. Sasha got married to Lyuba's roommate, Lena. Chaim married his girlfriend, Nina, who was finishing studies at medical school. We were forming a small Jewish community in Pinsk after the mass exodus of the survivors. In 1948 we heard about the establishment of the state of Israel; my dream finally coming true. I was far from there, and knowing of the bitter struggle that was going on there for survival I felt frustrated in not having part in it. However, I had a small part in the events which led to that historical happening. To my surprise, I discovered that my wife, who was brought up in an environment without Jewish traditions and feelings, shared my worries and anxieties about our new homeland. We started to become like one person in many ways, which was a big help in our difficult life.

At the end of 1948, Jenny's oldest brother, Zelik came home on vacation from the occupied Soviet forces stationed in Germany, where he served as a career officer. As life sometimes serves up surprises, Zelik fell in love with my former sister-in-law, Lyuba and married her. Thus Lyuba became my sister-in-law for the second time. Jenny's parents and two younger brothers, Monya and Yasha, lived across the street from us and I again had a family. By 1949 we were able to occupy the restored house and again I was finally living in the rooms in which I grew up. It was a hard struggle for simple survival. My job paid little, and Jenny, being an educated person, worked hard in the city pharmacy. It all meant little as we worked for the government six days a week for salaries that amounted to practically nothing compared to the

prices for the most necessary things, which were hard to get. I had to take on tailoring jobs at home at night. I worked late in the night and under danger of discovery by special tax agents who were prosecuting and issuing large fines. This was the reality and justice of the Communist paradise. We started to put in a lot of work in our garden, and with superhuman efforts established an additional source of vegetables and fruits, as well as a rest area for the family. We lived a primitive life similar to that of centuries ago. We had to get water from a well a few blocks away. In the winter we slid with the full buckets down the hill. To water the garden, I had to make ten trips back and forth, and this after a day of work. Jenny did the laundry outside in the backyard, without sanitation and running water. We were like cave men. To take a shower, we had to go across town to the public baths and wait in line for hours. In the summer we had to prepare wood for a long winter and cut it for storage to feed the ovens for warmth and cooking. When I look back at these times I wonder where we found the time and energy for all this. So much effort went just for survival, none for luxury. I was thinking how I could have avoided this by leaving in 1945, but I did not blame my wife, because the young, naive girl she was, could not know about a better life beyond the Iron Curtain. I stayed with no regrets, because my compensation was a terrific girl who became my pal for life. Strange to say, I still had deep in me the hope to someday bring my family out from that misery.

In November 1950, Jenny's father, Isaac, suddenly passed away. Her mother was left a widow, still young, with two sons on her hands. There was not much we

could do to help. Everybody had their share of hard reality. On top of this I lived in constant fear from Soviet security when I found out from friends that they had been pressured to give evidence about any anti-Soviet activities I was involved in. But it looked as if the police could find no provocateurs against me. It was as if people were guarding me. I remember once in the early hours of the morning we were awakened by my childhood friend, Yosef Epstein, who was coming from a night-long interrogation by the KGB. He told us that he was under so much pressure to help them destroy me that he was on the brink of committing suicide. These were terrible years, when any truck passing our street at night could mean that this was good-bye forever, that a knock on the door was coming.

On August 13, 1951 our second child was born, a delightful, happy girl we named Irena, in memory of Jenny's father. Despite Hitler's efforts to finish us off completely, we had created a new Jewish family for future generations. By that time I found out that the only other surviving member of my family had reached America, where she was building her own family, having given birth already to two sons. That meant my parents' beginnings were not lost forever. After Irena's birth, Jenny stopped working. We had a rule that a child needs her mother for at least the first three years. We thus faced harder times with only one salary. Due to my desire to live in my father's house, we were constantly involved in major repairs, but I had great satisfaction in seeing our children growing up in the same place where I had spent my childhood and play in the same garden and orchard, which by hard work we had created.



IN THE EARLY 1950's life for Jewish people became worse with the anti-Semitic campaign Stalin started to enforce. First came the destruction of the Jewish writers and actors who were killed openly, to be followed by mass hysteria against all Jews in the media. We felt it reaching its climax with the rumored deportation of all Jews to the Island of New Hope. It looked again like Poland in the years before the war, or the Nazi Holocaust again. We heard about Jews being thrown off trains in Moscow and Leningrad. I started feeling depressed, thinking that I had remained in Russia to bring forth a new generation of victims for persecution. But as in the Purim saga of Haman, there was another miracle and Stalin dropped dead suddenly on March 5, 1953 which started a chain of new events. However, we still had years of suffering to go through.

In 1955 I received a message thru my old channels to spread the news about a second exodus of our people; that there was a secret agreement to let former Polish citizens out of Russia. This agreement was being suppressed by the Soviet authorities, and we had to contact the Polish Embassy in Moscow for exit visas in order to be freed. After this news became known, our people started to travel to the Polish Embassy. Those who could

not travel made contact by mail. Soon began a mass appeal to the militia for emigration permits, but we always had among us informers. One day I was taken for an all-night interrogation by the KGB and drilled about spreading propaganda among the Polish Jews in Pinsk regarding emigration. When they were unable to get anything out of me they began to threaten that if I wanted to return to my family I would have to inform about certain men whom they mentioned to me. However, nothing could break my determination to remain true to myself and to my friends.

Receiving the document from the Polish Embassy started troubled times for us. When Jenny's mother discovered our intentions to emigrate she began a campaign of hysterics and under this pressure Jenny was reluctant to take the final step. I was desperate that the final moment of salvation would pass for the last time, but I could not force my will on her. Having lost my own family, I understood what family ties meant. This struggle in our family went on for a long time. Meanwhile came new regulations about emigration. The Polish visas were no longer sufficient. To make things more complicated it became necessary to submit documents proving Polish citizenship before September 1939. Where could we have preserved papers like this, when we had left our homes with only what we had on our backs? Due to our hesitations at home we had missed a golden opportunity to leave, but for me it was already no loss. Because of the constant battle with my mother-in-law I gave up this last hope and resigned myself to this life forever.

In 1957 the Soviet authorities made it easier to emigrate. We had to bring a certificate from the local city

authorities which stated that the person had lived on Polish territory prior to September 17, 1939 (before the Soviet takeover). However, our city bosses were forbidden to issue these papers. It was like a play with good and bad cops. Our people managed to find a loophole. They went to surrounding counties where the officials did not get such an order. I decided to get such a paper in the event that we reached an agreement at home about our departure. I was lucky that just at this time my sister-in-law Lyuba came to visit us from Gomel where she now lived, and finding out about my problem in getting such a paper, offered to travel with me to her home village and get for me a signed affidavit from some farmers about having lived there before the war. With Lyuba's help, we managed this successfully. With the help of friends who had connections in that county, the next step was to get this affidavit exchanged for an official paper. When this was accomplished, I only needed approval from Jenny's mother.

In the beginning of 1958 we still could not bring ourselves to go against her mother's objections. We were witnessing a steady exodus of our friends and I was again getting ready to resign myself to no way out. It did not help my arguments to my mother-in-law that all my intentions were towards improving our life and especially the future of our children. She kept repeating the same thing, "Just bury me first and then I won't see you leaving." But a chain of events soon occurred which decided our future. Just as I was thinking that all my suffering was in the past, suddenly everything went from bad to worse. It started on March 11, 1958 when Jenny fell going down to the basement of the pharmacy where

she worked and broke her leg in several places. Thus began a nightmare for us. She had to be in a cast for months, and besides that developed bad pleurisy in her side from lying in bed for long periods of time. I had to work, attend to her, take care of young children, do the house chores, feed everybody, and continue working into the late hours for my private customers, who were the main source of our income. Jenny's relatives, including the mother who protested so ardently against our desire to emigrate, did not rush to our help. When I look back at those months between March and June 1958, they are to me a constant nightmare.

To compound all this, agents from the tax department burst into our home one day like the Gestapo used to do in the occupation, searched the house and discovered a few garments in an unfinished stage which I was preparing for customers. They fined me an amount which exceeded my income for many years. This broke my patience and I decided I had had enough. Even my mother-in-law, seeing all the terrible events piling up on us, declared that she could see this as an omen for us to leave this damned place. Soon we applied for an exit visa to Poland in the ongoing repatriation, and started to wait for a permit which was far from a sure thing, as many people were being refused for various reasons. Meanwhile, Jenny started to walk on crutches, but our home situation was still difficult, and now we had problems with the tax agency. I would never be able to pay them, even if I worked day and night. In my helpless feelings I was burning up with the injustice of paying for working so hard in my spare time at home, time which in the free world people used for their enjoyment. This

was the *real* Communist justice, for which I had struggled in my young years. I hated myself for having been so naive in my teens, but then communism had fooled smarter people than I. But rebel that I was, I did not give up the fight. I composed an open letter to the editor of an important newspaper called *Rabota* (*Work*). This was the official paper of the puppet worker's union of the Soviet Union. I collected a few signatures of workers like myself, and wrote of our outrage at such practices against working people and the intrusion into our homes and our privacy. We were taking a risk, because during Stalin's regime we could have lost our lives for such nerve, but in 1958 there was a short spring thaw in Soviet behavior. After some time I received an answer from the editor, who stated that the actions of the tax agency were correct, but it looked as if the decision for the tax people was different, because all the fines against me were not prosecuted. This was my only victory against the Communist repression.

My most important fight, for the exit to freedom, was a story in itself. After a long wait for the answer about our exit permit I was called to see the head of the visa department, the militia major Balaniok, whom everyone feared like the Gestapo because of his attitude towards people. When I faced him he returned my papers, declining my affidavit about being a Polish citizen and living in former Polish territory as being false after a thorough checking out by the county police lieutenant in the villages where I claimed to have lived in that period of time. At that moment I felt as if my whole life had collapsed. My last hope was disappearing. I collected the papers and went to the door. Suddenly, the famous luck which had brought me back from the brink

of disaster many times in my life, smiled at me again. The major's voice called me back. He suggested that if I could find that militia lieutenant and make him take back his report about my claim and back up that paper, then he, Balaniok, would proceed with my papers. I could not believe my ears; that this man, famous for his meanness, was trying to help me.

The next Sunday, on my only day off, I went to the countryside to look for the militia officer on whom my whole future depended. I remember it was a very hot late May day which occurs in that part of the world. I walked from village to village because there was no transportation in that wilderness, and finally traced my man at a reunion celebration of former partisans. They had already consumed buckets of vodka. When I confronted the man on whom my future depended, he listened to my story and the major's suggestions. He stated again that he could find no evidence that anyone with my name had resided in the place where I had claimed to be. Suddenly, I noticed that he resembled a young boy who used to attend club dances in the village which I used to visit with my first wife, Raizel, before the war, when we were in our teens. I asked him whether his name was Nikolai, and even remembered his last name. When I told him which family I had married into, he suddenly remembered the Jewish name by which I had been called at that time. Like another miracle, I had found an old friend. He promised to meet me Monday morning in the Pinsk office, at the major's door.

That night I could not sleep in wait for the morning meeting. Finally I was at the office, meeting the lieutenant who still could not believe that the terrible Balaniok

would destroy the old report and accept the new one. It worked out fine and I was on my way. I was still very apprehensive because when I had decided in 1946 to remain in Russia I had to sign a statement in which I had given up all rights to repatriation. Besides that I was in bad standing with the KGB, so my hopes were very low.

Meanwhile life had to go on. In addition to all our chores, we had to prepare the garden and Jenny was still in bad shape. After the cast on her leg was removed, it was discovered that because of the tightness, the blood circulation had stopped and the leg looked so bad that one doctor even thought she would have to lose it. It took super effort to save the leg and only Jenny's determination and hard work walking on crutches in terrible pain eventually normalized that limb. It was a long ordeal.

In the middle of June we were called to the militia and filled out the papers which meant that our case was favorable. We then waited for the final decision. Jenny's condition started to improve. She was walking with a cane, and in that condition I remember her crawling over the garden for the hard toiling which was required. We had to think of all the fruits and vegetables we were going to need and the big help they were for our family. Finally, on the 11th of August 1958 we received the good news that we were allowed to leave Russia. We began the preparation for the journey. It looked now as if my desire to restore my father's house and the sacrifices we had to make became a blessing for us. I managed to transfer the house in my name, and we could now sell it and have money for our journey. We sold our house and suddenly we were rich, compared to what we had before. We had to buy things which we could later sell in Poland because

there was no possibility of exchanging Russian money for foreign currency. I went to Moscow to buy appliances which we knew we were going to need for what looked like a long stay in Poland, and for some articles which I knew would bring us a profit in Polish zlotys. We had to arrange for a commercial boxcar on a railroad train to transport the large items with us, such as a refrigerator, washing machine, sewing machine, and a motorcycle with a carriage to sell in Poland.

Part IV



FINALLY, AFTER ALL the preparations, on the 16th of October 1958 we found ourselves in a train similar to those cattle cars on which I had travelled in the war time. I will never forget that rainy Tuesday, sitting in the wagon waiting for the departure from my hometown for the very last time. It was nightfall and we were still at the Pinsk station because that commercial train was in no hurry to move. We had arranged the wagon for a long journey, predicted to be about eight days. It was prepared like a room, with a bed and even a little iron oven to warm us in the cold October nights ahead. My girls finally fell asleep exhausted and I was filled with emotional thoughts about all that was happening. I had to compare this to 13 years earlier, when I had come back to the same town alone, and after confirming my worst fears had felt the loneliest man on earth. Only my desire to go on fighting for my dream kept me going, and now after long hard years I was coming out with these three dear girls and with the purpose of bringing them to safe shores. I was thinking about the little girls who did not understand what misery I was trying to take them away from, and I thought about the long journey awaiting us, towards a final destination of which I was not certain myself. Finally in the middle of the night the train moved out, and I said

goodbye for the last time to that place where I was born and spent my best early years. I had tried to love that part of the earth, but was taught first by the Poles and later by the Russians to hate that land which had swallowed all my dearest people. I was thinking that 13 years ago I had ventured back into Russia for what looked like a short time, and it had taken me 13 years of hard struggle, fears and dangers to come out. There were no regrets because here I also found my happiness by meeting a friend for life like Jenny who had helped me to put my life together again and gave me two darlings for whom I had a reason to go on with my life.

Through that self-analysis by morning we reached Brest-Litovsk, the border crossing to Poland, where we had to undergo gruelling inspection by border guards. They kept us there for 24 hours, an eternity for me. I did not believe until the last minute that they would actually let us out from that hell. When I saw the train crossing the bridge over the river Bug I felt as I am sure the Jews felt upon crossing the Red Sea. We were finally on Polish soil and had made the first leg of our difficult adventure.

After eight exhausting days of travel in that boxcar we arrived at the transit camp for the repatriates on the southern end of Poland in the town of Gerlitz on the East German border. From here we were on our own. From the first moment of our journey from Pinsk and through all the stops, we had to do all the moving ourselves. There were no movers and we had crates of enormous weight. We had to place everything in storage by the time of our arrival at the camp. After a few days I left to look for a place to settle my family. At that time there were tens of thousands of families like us leaving Russia in

transit through Poland. The only help we got was our people's mutual support. Since I knew some families from Pinsk in the city of Legnitza, I selected that town. I was not wrong. There I found brotherly assistance and soon brought my family there to a dear friend who took us in an apartment of a few rooms which we shared with his family of five for a few weeks until we could find a place of our own. This was a nice apartment, where for the first time in our lives we had a bathroom, running water and even gas. However, we had to walk up to the fifth floor because the buildings of that time were without elevators. Still we felt like royalty. In comparison with Russia, Poland in 1958 was like a breath of spring. We started to enjoy a little freedom and had happy reunions with friends arriving from all over Russia. We found out that the economic conditions here were not much better than what we had left behind, but we had items to sell and had money. For the first time ever we had a refrigerator and could store all kinds of foods which were hard to get in the long lines at the government stores.

After taking some time to establish myself, I went to the Israeli Embassy in Warsaw to register for emigration to Israel. At the same time I made contact with my sister, Yetta, in the United States. We knew we had to hurry to arrange exit from Poland before the spring thaw changed to cold war again. In my visit to the Israeli Embassy I found out that I was not forgotten. They received me like a lost brother and were amazed that I had survived such a long ordeal. They were worried about the danger I was still in, even in Poland, and suggested a speedy exit, which they could provide, but not for the whole family. I would never agree to leave

first by myself and have my family come later, so I decided to proceed with the regular emigration process, to take a chance as long as we could leave together as a family. We applied for exit permits to Israel and waited for the good day.

Our life, for the first time, was free of financial worries. We had money from the sale of items brought from Pinsk and from the sale of the house. We also received help from my friends in Warsaw whom I continued to visit and who told me not to worry about settling down when we would reach our final dreamland. But for me the time moved too slowly. I wanted to find myself out from behind the Iron Curtain. Meanwhile, we enjoyed the liberal era in Poland. We started to get together and spend happy evenings with others singing Hebrew songs and dancing like in my teen years in the Zionist youth in Pinsk. When, in the summer of 1959, the national soccer team of Israel arrived in Wroslaw to play against the Polish national team, the event transpired into a gathering of tens of thousands of Jews, the new emigrants from the Soviet Union. At the stadium which used to be Hitler's Olympia Stadium were flying the Israeli flags and when the *Hatikvah* was played, it became the moment of which I had dreamed for so many terrible years. Our cries topped the band. It was the ultimate moment of our triumph over Hitler. It also became a day of reunion of people who were counted for dead and who were meeting each other for the first time in many years.

While we were applying for emigration to Israel, I had also been maintaining contact with my sister in America. Suddenly I was called to the American Embassy in War-

saw where I was informed that visas had been received for my family after intervention from my sister and guarantees from my uncle, my mother's brother. We were now faced with a dilemma; we suddenly had a choice of two countries to go to. My heart was for Israel, to realize my old dream and to raise my children where they would belong. When my sister found out about my intentions, she called on the telephone and, crying, begged me to change my plan. She felt that as the only two survivors of a large family we were destined to be together. Her justification was that if after settling in America we were still not happy, it would be easy to move to Israel.

After a long wait, the postman brought us the documented permission to leave Poland. To our amazement, he handed us two separate envelopes, one, a permit to go to Israel, and the other, a visa for immediate departure for the U.S. How many miracles could still happen in my life, in which each seemed to top the other?!? I left the choice up to Jenny, and finally it was to the U.S.A. The next day I had to travel to Wroslaw, to the main emigration office and make a statement rejecting the Israeli permit and selecting the American offer. I thought on that day how ironic history can be, that years ago I would have given years of my life for one haven to go to and now I had a choice of several.



2

AGAIN WE WERE packing our new belongings and preparing a tremendous crate for, what I hoped was, the final leg of our wanderings. After exactly two years' stay in this hated country, on December 25, 1960, we left for the U.S. We left with a lot less than we had arrived with. Life in Poland was terribly expensive and we paid for the land travel through Europe to the port of Cherbourg in France where we would board a ship, passage on which my family in the U.S. paid for. Fifteen years from the day I returned from that terrible war to Pinsk, I was on my way out of Europe to a new life in a new world.

From Legnitza we took the train to Warsaw where the next day we boarded the Warsaw-Paris express which took us thru East Germany to West Germany. Finally we crossed the last border leading out of the communist block. I knew then that I was a free man. Looking back to the East I could state to myself that the only positive note about the Soviet Union which we should never forget was that in the darkest hours of our Jewish tragedy, when the Western free world was deaf and blind to our destruction and kept all doors closed to the U.S., even turning back the refugees to Nazi ovens, the Soviets were the only ones who admitted hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews who found a place of refuge. As

an eyewitness I can state that in the worst years of hunger and misery they shared the little they had with the refugees, and if thousands of us found ourselves in the Soviet gulags and many died, that was a product of the mad dog Stalin who destroyed the best of his own people as well, and later after the war began the destruction of the Jewish people.

After crossing the republic of West Germany we entered Belgium and then France. We arrived in Paris and were feeling lost in new surroundings, not knowing what to do, when Jewish solidarity came to our rescue. Suddenly there were people who spoke in our language. They were representatives of H.I.S., a Jewish relief organization. They brought us to a hotel where we were to spend two days before leaving for the port of Cherbourg to board our ship to New York. We found ourselves tourists exploring the wonders of Paris, and were even provided with some French currency. Jenny and I visited the most famous sights in the little time we had, knowing that our children were left under good Jewish care. The next day we were put on a train for Cherbourg, where we boarded the fantastic *Queen Elizabeth*. On the last day of 1960 we were finally on our way to our new home, America.

During the three and a half day ocean crossing, with nothing to do, I was left with my thoughts. I thought I should be happy with the way everything worked out, but I felt a strange turmoil in my soul until I sorted out my thoughts. I was taught by a great lady, my mother, never to formulate right from wrong according to other people's judgments about my doings, only to find if I could live in peace with my inner self after my actions. Here on

that final crossing of the Atlantic I was sad and I soon discovered why. We were not going in the direction of my dreams, to the land for which I promised to struggle. I felt like a deserter in the middle of a fight going to a safer harbor. I started to defend my actions to myself. I realized I was already 44 years old, no longer a young fighter ready without hesitation to meet any danger and hardship. If I was lucky, I had already lived half of my life. I had three dear souls depending on me. I knew about the harsh conditions of life in Israel. Especially important to consider was my wife's state of health which had suffered through a very hard life growing up in wartime Russia and in the twelve married years in Pinsk with constant struggles to meet ends and heroic efforts to keep us all presentable. She deserved a better life. I made peace with my heart and did not feel guilty anymore. Besides, I had contributed something to the struggle. In Israel were many people whom I assisted in their survival efforts.

Part V



ON THE THIRD of January 1961 we landed in New York and were met by my sister and her husband. I had last seen them in the winter of 1946 in Siberia. The first ten days we spent at my sister's. I soon found out that our hard times were not over. The last two years in transit limbo, plus travelling expenses and daily necessity expenses, had left us with about \$5 when we arrived in the U.S. We had no help from anyone for the beginning of our new life. When I look back on the year 1961 I can say for sure that it was one of the worst periods of our life. We had to find a place to live. It was then one of the coldest winters in the history of New York. I did not know the language and had to find a job. We needed money for rent and furniture. Jenny and the girls came down with a terrible flu. It looked like all the bad things were coming on us as they had in that 1958 winter in Pinsk. I was in such a desperate mood that I was sorry we had left Poland.

Things started to look better little by little. After two weeks of being in the country, I found a job tailoring. Again, my old trade helped us out. My cousin Fred, whose father died before our arrival, bought us some furniture for what, in those days, looked to us like billions of dollars. We started to live on my small salary.

Jenny, still weak from the flu, went to work in a pencil factory. My heart ached to see her, with her education and intelligence, sitting and laboring for pennies, but I knew it would be temporary. We would get out of this. We lived in a small three-room apartment without cross ventilation, where at night there was no air to breathe. The children were miserable too. They had to begin school from the bottom, not understanding a word, as if they were from another planet. Fannie was already 14 years old and had to make up very fast what it took others 7 years to learn. It was hell for all of us. From the first week, Jenny and I started to attend evening school. I had to travel to work and back three hours daily, getting home in time to grab something to eat in a hurry, and walking 7 blocks to school. Sometimes I was so tired that it was an effort to get up the next morning. I was so desperate for money that I began to work on Saturdays and was given four hours of work for the same \$2 an hour. I spent a whole day travelling and working for \$8. Every day I thought what a mistake I had made by choosing the Golden Land over my other choice, Israel, where I would have been given all the assistance necessary to settle. To make matters worse, after the cold winter arrived the hottest summer that could be remembered. It was especially hard for Jenny who could not take the heat and humidity. I began to think I had taken her out from the misery of Russia only to die here. I will never forget that terrible year of 1961. It will go down in my memory as one of the many crises in our life.

Gradually, things started to improve. By August I found a better paid union job in a large corporation which manufactured mens' clothing. It was in Brooklyn,

half the previous travelling time. When my abilities were discovered after a short time, I was promoted to foreman. With overtime and a second job selling company outfits on Saturdays and Sundays, I was working seven days a week mostly, but making good money. We soon moved to a better apartment, although it was still only three rooms. Jenny enrolled in a business course for a short time, and with her exceptional abilities managed very quickly to find an office job close to home. We were on our way. With my wife's skillful home management, we soon started to save money, and after a few years moved to a four-room apartment, where finally both the parents and the children had their own bedrooms.

In 1964 I moved on to a better paid and more comfortable job. Jenny had a nice office position. By that time we had joined the Zionist Alliance and became active in organizing new branches made up of newcomers like us. I discovered, to my most pleasant surprise, that my wife, in addition to her other many positive qualities, was also a dedicated Zionist with a warm Jewish heart and love for Israel. During the following years our life steadily improved. I found other side jobs and we continued to save. We had an interesting social life working in the Zionist movement.

By 1968 we were able to buy a new car. In the same year our older daughter, Fannie, got married to Marty Schwartz and we were able to give her a beautiful wedding. In 1969 Jenny travelled back to Russia to visit her family, but did not see her oldest brother Zelik, who had passed away just before her arrival. After this visit, Jenny came back with greater admiration and love for our new adopted country, so strong was the contrast between the

two worlds. We started to travel around the United States, discovering a beautiful land, where with hard work one could achieve just about anything. In 1970 we moved again to a new home by the ocean. Our life was getting better with time. The only dark aspect of our life was the worsening health condition of our darling Jenny.

In 1976 our younger daughter, Irena, married a terrific young man named Abe Stundel. By that time Jenny and I were already blessed with two grandsons; Fannie's sons Ian, born in 1970, and Michael, born in 1973. Our family was expanding, and we now had time to enjoy all of them because in 1976 I retired from my job, working only part time. However, Jenny's health worsened and became so critical that at the end of 1979 she had to undergo a triple coronary bypass operation, which most fortunately improved her health. In 1980 we were blessed with a terrific granddaughter, Irena's daughter, named for the biblical Deborah. And then finally, came the highlight of our life. In the spring of 1985, Jenny and I achieved our life long dream of visiting our land, Israel, walk through the old biblical holy places and see for ourselves the dream of thousands of years come to reality. After that accomplishment, we felt that we had lived our lives to the fullest.

Now all these years later I would like to end the writing of these lifetime memories on a nostalgic note. This is a story of a survivor, born of a people who had lived for centuries in parts of Europe, and who, with honest hard work helped to develop that land. They were raised to love the places where they had been born, as it is supposed to be, but were destroyed by prejudice and

terrible hatred to eventually be buried in that hateful part of the earth. We, the few survivors, were chased out by the same unstoppable hatred to look for a more hospitable land, which we found in this G-d blessed country where we built a life and a home for generations to come. To them I dedicate all these memories.

Michael Goldberg
April 1988

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